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Romances

***HOLIDAY ISSUE!**
***FEATURES FOUR**
HEARTWARMING LOVE
STORIES FILLED WITH
CHRISTMAS
CHEER!

The Gift of Ch
Christmas Str
A Thousand R
Christmas Wishes

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CAMPBELL

JENNY McGUIRE

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DEBBIE MACOMBER

Debbie Macomber hails from the state of Washington. As a busy wife and mother of four, she strives to keep her family healthy and happy. As a prolific author of dozens of bestselling romance novels, she strives to keep her readers happy with each new book she writes.

JOAN HOHL

A Gemini and an inveterate dreamer, Joan Hohl says she always has her head in the clouds. Though she reads eight or nine books a week, she only discovered romances ten years ago. "But as soon as I read the first one," she confesses, "I was hooked." Now a successful author, she is thrilled to be doing what she loves to do best.



BETHANY CAMPBELL

Bethany Campbell, an English major and textbook consultant, calls her writing world her "hidey-hole," that marvelous place where true love always wins out. Her hobbies include writing poetry and thinking about that little scar on Harrison Ford's chin. She laughingly admits that her husband, who produces videos and writes comedy, approves of the first one only.

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From the desk of Candy Lee,
Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader,

The Holiday Season...here, at last! With so much to do, searching for the perfect gifts, thinking about all the fun parties and great family get-togethers, there's nothing I look forward to more than taking some special time for myself to enjoy some great romance reading!

So today, as the snow falls and I'm snuggling under my favorite comforter with this month's volume of The World's Best Romances, I'm ready to be swept away by a woman intent on repaying a debt, with interest, to an intriguing man...a Christmas miracle that transcends time to bring two hearts what they desire most...a handsome Scrooge and a feisty woman who clash passionately...the web of deceit that will ultimately bring love and joy, making it a Christmas to remember!

I hope you enjoy reading these four wonderful romance stories and wish you a happy holiday season filled with love and laughter!

Best wishes,

Candy Lee

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

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Romances

C O N T E N T S

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A THOUSAND ROSES

Bethany Campbell

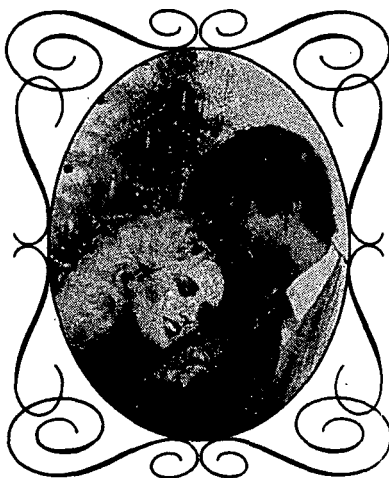
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CHRISTMAS WISHES

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DEBBIE MACOMBER

The Gift of Christmas



Ashley and Cooper are proof positive that opposites attract. Will the special magic of the Christmas season help to unite them in a lasting love?



Ashley Robbins clenched her hands together as she sat in a plush velvet chair ten stories up in a Seattle high-rise. The cashier check to Cooper Masters was in her purse. Ashley had decided to deliver it herself.

Today, since she was meeting Cooper, she had dressed conservatively. Never shy, she was the most popular teacher at John Knox Christian High School. Cooper had made that possible. No one knew he had lent her the money to complete her studies. Not even Claudia, her best friend and Cooper's niece.

Ashley and Cooper were the godparents to Claudia's oldest boy—a link that pleased Ashley. She'd been in love with him since she was sixteen, though no one had guessed during those ten years—least of all Cooper.

"Mr. Masters will see you now," a sweet voice informed Ashley, who smiled and followed its owner through a heavy oak door.

"Ashley." Cooper stood. "What a pleasant surprise."

"Hello, Cooper." He'd changed in the six months since she'd seen him. Streaks of silver ran through

his hair, and tiny lines fanned out from his eyes. He wasn't compellingly handsome, but seeing him again stirred familiar feelings.

"Sit down, please." He indicated a chair. "What can I do for you? Any problems?"

"Everything's fine." She opened her purse and handed him the check. "I wanted to give you this personally. I owe you so much, it seemed almost rude to put it in the mail."

Cooper glanced at the check and two dark brows arched with surprise. "This satisfies the loan," he said. "Your mother tells me you've taken a second job?"

"You see her more often than I do," she replied. Ashley's mother was the Masters' cook and housekeeper.

"Was it necessary to pay this off as fast as possible?"

"Fast? I've owed you this money for over four years." She laughed lightly.

"I didn't care if you ever paid me back. I certainly didn't think you so proud that you'd half kill yourself to return it."

His reaction amazed her. "It isn't pride," she assured him, "but a code of honor."

"But it isn't necessary," he answered.

"It is for me," she countered.

He slowly nodded. "I understand." Then, "Have you heard from Claudia and Seth?" he asked.

Ashley smiled. "Her last letter said something about coming down for Christmas."

"I hope they do." The buzzer rang and Cooper flipped the switch. "Yes, Gloria."

"Mr. Benson is here."

Taking her cue, Ashley stood. "I won't keep you."

"I was wondering..." Cooper moved to her side, his look slightly uneasy.

"Would you have dinner with me? A small celebration for paying off the loan."

"I'd like that very much." Her heart soared.

"Tonight at seven?"

"Wonderful. Should I wear something formal?"

"Informal."

Ashley chose to wear her finest designer jeans, knowing she looked good. At five foot seven, she was all legs. The pink sweatshirt she'd chosen had a starburst of sequins that extended to the ends of the full length sleeves.

Over the months Ashley had dated several men, and she'd recently been seeing Dennis Webb, another teacher, on a steady basis. But no one had ever attracted her the way Cooper did.

The doorbell chimed precisely at seven. Claudia had claimed that she could set her watch by Cooper.

He greeted her with a warm look that gradually faded as he handed her a florist's box. "Hello."

To Cooper informal meant a three piece suit and flowers. Glancing down at her jeans and sweatshirt, one cowboy boot on, the other missing, she smiled weakly. "Thank you." She took the white box. "Sit down, please." She fluffed up the pillows on the sofa. "I'm running a little late tonight. If you give me a few minutes I'll change clothes."

"You look fine," he murmured, glancing at his watch.

What he was really saying was that they'd be late for their reservation if she changed. "You're sure? It'll only take a minute."

His nod seemed determined. Self-conscious, embarrassed, and angry with herself, Ashley slipped her foot into the other boot. Then she reached for the florist's box. A lovely orchid was nestled inside.

"Oh, Cooper," she murmured. "Thank you."

"It's the type women wear on their wrist," he said.

Cooper held Ashley's coat for her. His hands seemed to linger on her shoulders, but it could have been Ashley's imagination. Cooper would never be one to display affection openly.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"There's an Italian restaurant near here."

"Sounds delicious. I love Italian food."

Cooper parked outside the small, family-owned restaurant. It was apparent when they were seated that he had never been here before. The thought flashed through her mind that he didn't want to be seen with her where he might be recognized. But Ashley quickly dismissed the idea.

"Is everything all right?" He frowned.

"Yes, of course." She forced a smile. "I wonder how long it'll be before we know if Claudia will be coming for Christmas," she said.

"Time's getting close, I imagine we'll know soon."

The waiter took their order, then brought salads.

"It's been exceptionally chilly for this time of year," Cooper commented.

Ashley thought it a sad commentary that the only common

ground between them was Claudia and the weather. "Yes, it has."

The conversation during dinner seemed stiff and strained. When they stepped out of the restaurant, Ashley was pleased to discover that it was snowing.

"Oh, Cooper, look," she cried with delight. "I love the snow. Let's go for a walk," she suggested.

"Where would you like to go?" An indiscernible expression clouded his eyes.

"There's a marina a couple of blocks from here."

"Fine." His smile was the first genuine one all evening.

"Doesn't this make you want to sing?" she asked.

"No," he chuckled. "It makes me want to sit in front of a roaring fireplace with a warm drink."

Ashley clucked. "If you must know, I don't think you've done anything impulsive or daring in your entire life, Cooper Masters."

"Of course I have," he denied.

"Then I dare you to make a snowball and throw it at me." She ran a few steps ahead of him. "Bet you can't do it," she taunted.

Cooper stuffed his hands in his pockets. "This is silly."

"It's supposed to be crazy, remember?" she chided.

"But it's not right for a man to throw snowballs at a lady."

"Will this make things easier for you?" she shouted, scooping up a handful of snow. With an accuracy that astonished her, she threw a snowball that hit him in the chest. The horrified look on Cooper's face sent her into peals of laughter. Losing her balance on the ice-slickened sidewalk, Ashley went sprawling.

"That's what you get for hurling snow at courteous gentlemen," Cooper called, once he saw she wasn't hurt. He shifted a tightly packed snowball from hand to hand.

"Cooper, you wouldn't?" She batted her eyelashes. "Here, help me up."

But a wicked gleam flashed from dark eyes. "You said I never did anything crazy or daring."

"You wouldn't!" Her voice trembled with laughter.

"You're right," he murmured, dropping the snowball and reaching for her. He pulled her into his arms, then hesitated, as if expecting her to protest. When she didn't, he softly pressed his mouth to hers. The kiss should have been tender, but it became hungry and fierce.

As they broke apart, Cooper asked, "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "Cooper?" Her voice was a whisper.

"Would you mind doing that again?"

"Now?"

She nodded.

Cooper pulled her back into his embrace, and this time the kiss was gentle. Lost in the swirling awareness, Ashley felt as if he had touched the innermost part of her being. For years she had dreamed of this moment. He had taken her heart and touched her soul. Never would she be the same again. A soft smile trembled on her lips at the sound of his furiously pounding heart.

"This is crazy," Cooper murmured hoarsely.

"No," Ashley countered, "it's wonderful."

Carefully he relaxed his hold, his features unnaturally pale. "I'm too old for you." His look was remote.

Her bubble of happy contentment seemed to burst; he regretted kissing her. "I dared you to do something impulsive, remember?" she said.

His gaze moved to his watch. "I think I should take you home now. Perhaps we could see the marina another time."

His touch was impersonal as they strolled back to the parking lot. To hide her discomfort Ashley hummed Christmas music.

"Rushing the season a bit, aren't you?"

"I suppose. But the snow makes it feel like Christmas. Christ wouldn't mind if we celebrated His birth every day of the year."

"The shopping malls would love it," he replied.

"I'm talking about the spiritual aspect of the holiday."

When Cooper took the keys out of her hand and opened the apartment door for her, she murmured, "Thank you. The evening was..."

"Crazy," he finished.

Wonderful, her mind shouted. Afraid of what her eyes would reveal, she lowered her head and the blond curls fell forward, wreathing her face. "Crazy," she repeated.

A finger placed under her chin lifted her eyes to his. His were dark and unreadable, hers soft and shining. He cupped the soft, smooth skin of her cheek, a gentle caress that sent the blood pulsing and brought telltale color to her face.

"If ever you need someone, I want you to contact me."

Although Cooper had never said as much, Ashley knew she could always go to him.

"I will." Her voice sounded incredibly weak.

"I want you to promise me." He took out a business card and wrote

down a phone number. "You can reach me here any time of the day."

The card seemed to sear her hand. In his own way Cooper cared about her. "Thank you." Impulsively, she raised two fingers to her lips, then brushed them across his mouth. His hand stopped hers, his look branded her. Slowly he lowered his mouth to hers in a gentle, sweet kiss.

"Good night, Ashley."

"Good night." Standing in the open doorway, she watched until he drove into the dark night. A solitary figure illuminated by the falling snow.

SEVERAL DAYS later, when the officer directed her to the phone, Ashley called her family first, but there was no answer.

"Is there anyone else, miss?" the man asked.

"Yes," she answered tightly, taking out the card.

"Cooper Masters' office." The efficient voice Ashley recognized as belonging to his secretary came over the line.

"This is Ashley Robbins. Would it be possible to speak to Cooper?"

"If you'll hold the line, I'll connect you."

"Ashley." Cooper's voice boomed. "What's wrong?"

"It isn't an emergency," she began, feeling silly. "I mean, I don't think they'll keep me."

"Ashley, what's going on?"

She hesitated, a lump forming in her throat. "I'm in jail."

"Jail!" Cooper boomed. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

"But, Cooper, Kent's a good thirty minutes away."

"Kent?" The anger in his voice was barely controlled as the phone line was disconnected.

Ashley heard Cooper several minutes before she saw him.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Well, someone took the license plate off Milligan. That's my moped. I parked it outside the restaurant where I work part-time, and someone took the plates."

"That isn't any reason to arrest you!" he shouted.

"They haven't arrested me," she yelled, humiliated when her voice cracked. "Someone took the plates, and I don't have the registration on me, so the police need some evidence that I own the bike. All I need is for you to go to my apartment and bring back the registration. Then I can leave." She handed him her key.

"There are a couple of lawyers on their way here. I'll leave word

for them." With that, he left the room.

Twenty minutes later, he returned with the officer.

"You're free to go," the policeman said, "although you can't drive the moped until you have a new license plate."

Before she could protest, Cooper spoke. "I've already made arrangements for the bike to be picked up. It'll be delivered to your place sometime tomorrow afternoon."

*

ASHLEY'S MOPED was delivered as promised. Webb drove her home from school, then took her to apply for new license plates. Granted a temporary license, she could now ride Milligan again.

Webb was tall and thin, his face almost gaunt, but he was one of the craziest, nicest people Ashley had ever known. When he dropped her off, she invited him in.

"Got plans for the weekend?" he asked over a cup of cocoa.

Ashley shrugged. "Not really. I wanted to do some Christmas shopping, but I dread fighting the crowds."

"Want to go skiing Saturday afternoon?"

"I didn't know you skied," Ashley said.

"I don't. I thought you'd teach me."

"Forget that, fellow, you take lessons like everyone else, then we'll talk about skiing." She laughed. "But you could take me to dinner."

"Fine, what are you cooking?"

"Honestly, Webb, how do you do it?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"Invite me out to dinner, and I end up cooking?"

"It's all in the wrist." He grinned.

Thinking about their conversation later, Ashley couldn't help laughing. Webb was crazy and wonderful, and in her own way Ashley loved him. But what she felt for Cooper was intense and couldn't compare with the friendship she shared with Webb.

Angry with her thoughts, and herself, Ashley changed clothes for her dancercise aerobic program. Dressed in purple satin shorts, pink leg-warmers and a gray T-shirt, she stood in the middle of the living room waiting for the warm-up instructions from a cassette. She had just completed the first round of exercises when the doorbell rang. Ashley checked the peephole and to her horror, she saw it was Cooper.

"Hello, again," she said, opening the door.

He seemed puzzled by her attire. "Did I catch you at a bad time? I could come back later."

She grabbed a towel to wipe her face. "I was just doing some aerobics. Care to join me?"

For a long moment silence filled the room. "Did you get Madigan back?"

"Milligan," she corrected.

"How'd you happen to name a moped Milligan?"

"It was the salesman's name. We dated a couple of times afterward, and I couldn't think of the bike without thinking of Milligan."

"They're not the safest thing around, are they?"

"I suppose not, but I'm careful."

"In checking statistics I discovered..."

"Statistics? Honestly, Cooper, I'm perfectly safe."

"I knew this wasn't going to be easy. You're as stubborn as Claudia," he said. "I'm going to worry about you riding around on that silly bit of chrome and rubber."

"I've had Milligan for almost two years," she said.

"Ashley," he said. "I want you to accept these and promise to use them." He held out a set of keys. "They're for a new compact car. If you don't like the color..."

She stared at him in disbelief. "You don't honestly expect me to accept that, do you?"

"No," he acknowledged, "I didn't think you would. If you insist on paying me..."

"Paying you!" she cried. "I just cleared one loan—I'm not about to take on another. You think that because I phoned you, you have the right to step into my life. Keep the car, because I assure you I don't need it."

"As you wish," he murmured, returning the keys to his pocket. "If you'll excuse me, I have an appointment."

A LETTER from Claudia was waiting for Ashley after work the following Monday afternoon. It read:

Dear Ashley,

I'm sorry it's taken me so long to write. The good news is that we'll be arriving at Sea/Tac Airport, Saturday, December 12 at 10 A.M. and plan to stay with Cooper through to the first of the year. That first week Seth will be involved in a series of meetings, but the remainder of the time will be the vacation we didn't take this summer.

I can't tell you how excited I am to be seeing you again. I've missed you so much.

Promise to block out the holidays on your calendar, I'm dying to see you again. The Lord's been good to me, and I have so much to tell you.

Love

Claudia, Seth, John, and
Scott

Ashley circled the day on her calendar. When Scott had been born that spring, Cooper had flown up to Nome to spend time with Claudia, Seth, and John. Ashley had yet to see the newest Lessinger. This was going to be the most wonderful Christmas yet.

THE ALARM buzzed early on the twelfth. Ashley would have to hurry and shower if she was going to meet Claudia's plane.

She parked Milligan in the multistory garage, then hurried down the concourse.

Cooper was already at the gate when she arrived. He didn't notice her and for a moment Ashley enjoyed just watching him. He looked fresh and vital. Had it only been two weeks since she'd last seen him?

"Good morning, Cooper." She gave him a bright smile. "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?"

If he was surprised to see her he hid the shock well. "Ashley," he

said. "Did you bring Madigan with you?"

"Milligan," she corrected. "You never give up, do you?"

"Not if I can help it." He pointed to a large jet that was making its descent. "I think that's their plane now."

Ashley's heart fluttered with excitement. "Cooper," she mouthed softly. "My school is having a Christmas party next weekend. Would you . . . consider going with me?"

He looked shocked. "Next weekend?"

"The nineteenth . . . it's a Friday night. A dinner party, I don't think it'll be all that formal."

"Are you wearing your cowboy boots?"

"No, I was going to borrow Dad's fishing rubbers," she shot back, then, "All right, for you, I'll wear a dress."

Cooper took out a small black appointment book. "It seems I've already got plans that night," he said.

Ashley felt hurt and disappointed.

"I understand," she murmured.

Soon, Claudia and Seth walked out of the Jetway. Young John broke loose and ran into Cooper's waiting arms.

"Uncle Coop," he cried, looping his arms around Cooper's neck. "Auntie Ash?" he questioned, holding out his arms to her.

Cooper handed the boy to her waiting arms. Now the two men were enthusiastically shaking hands.

"Ashley," Claudia chimed. "I didn't know if you'd make it to the airport. I love your hair."

"So does Webb," she laughed and had the satisfaction of seeing Cooper's eyes narrow. "And this little angel must be Scott." With John's legs wrapped around her waist, Ashley examined the eight-month-old baby in Claudia's arms.

Ashley didn't get a chance to talk to her friend until later that afternoon. Both boys were down for a nap, Seth and Cooper were concentrating on a game of chess in Cooper's den, while Ashley and Claudia sat enjoying the view from the formal dining room.

"Do you see much of Cooper?" Claudia asked with deceptive casualness.

"Hardly at all," Ashley replied truthfully. "Why?"

"I don't know. You two were giving one another odd looks at the airport."

Ashley said, "I'm sure you're mistaken. Can you imagine Cooper being interested in anyone like me?"

"In some ways I can," Claudia insisted. "You two balance one another. And I know one thing," she said. "He thinks highly of you. He has for years."

"You're kidding!"

"I'm not. I don't know that he would have allowed me to marry Seth if it hadn't been for you."

"Nonsense," Ashley said. "I knew you and Seth were right for one another from the first. I don't know of any couple who belong together more than you two. And it shows, Claudia. Your face is radiant. That kind of inner happiness only comes with the deep love of a man."

Claudia's face flushed with color. "I know it sounds crazy, but I'm more in love with Seth now than when I married him four years ago." Pausing, she drank from her coffee mug. "What about you? Any man in your future?"

"Several," Ashley teased. "None I'm serious about."

"What about Webb? You've written about him."

Before Ashley could assure Claudia her relationship with Webb was just a convenient friendship, their attention was diverted to tall male figures.

Seth crossed the room and placed a loving arm across Clau-

dia's shoulders. Cooper remained in the archway.

"As usual Cooper beat the socks off me."

"What about you, Claudia?" Cooper invited. "You used to play a mean game of chess."

Standing, Claudia looped her arm around her husband's waist. "Not me, I think I'll join the boys and take a nap."

Ashley stood, too. "I'd better rev up Milligan and get home before that gray cloud..."

"No," Claudia interrupted. "You play Cooper, Ash. You always were a better chess player than me."

"Would you care for a game, Miss Robbins?" he asked.

"Just what are you suggesting, Mr. Masters?"

Claudia giggled. "You know, suddenly I'm not the least bit tired."

"Yes, you are," Seth murmured, and she didn't object when he led her from the room.

Playing Cooper was an opportunity too good to miss. Ashley was an excellent chess player and had been assistant coach for the school's team the year before.

"Without meaning to appear crass, I would like to suggest a friendly wager," he said.

"Just what are you suggesting?" Ashley feigned shock.

"If I win the match, then you'll accept the new car. And promise to drive it to and from work daily."

"And just what do I get if I win?" she countered.

"That's up to you."

She released a weary sigh. "I don't think you can give me what I want," she mumbled.

"I think I can."

"All right," she added. "If I win, you must promise never to speak ill of Milligan again, or insinuate that riding him is unsafe." Cooper opened his mouth in mute protest. "And I would ask for a generous donation to the school's scholarship fund. Agreed?"

"Agreed." The teasing light left his eyes as he viewed the chessboard with a serious look.

It didn't take Ashley long to impress Cooper with her ability.

"Claudia was right, you are a good player." The compliment was issued grudgingly.

"Thank you," she responded.

He made his next move, and Ashley studied the board. "Claudia was right about something else, too."

"What's that?" Ashley said absently.

"I don't think I've ever told you how attractive you are."

His husky tone seemed to reach out and wrap itself around her.

"What'd you say?" Ashley faltered.

"I said you're very beautiful."

The current of awareness between them was so strong that Ashley would have gladly surrendered to it. As it was, her determination to prove herself was quickly lost in the power of his gaze.

"It's your move."

Ashley's eyes rounded with anger. He was playing another game with her, a psychological one. Using her attraction to him, he'd hoped to diminish her level of concentration. His game read Cooper, one, Ashley zilch.

Jumping to her feet, she jogged around the room, lifting her knees as high as possible.

"I hate to appear ignorant, but what are you doing?"

She paused and tossed him a brazen glare. "It was either vent my anger physically or punch you out, Cooper Masters."

"What did I do?" he asked in disbelief.

"You know, so don't try to deny it." The anger had dissipated as she returned to her chair and resumed her study of the board.

"Cooper?" she whispered his name suggestively.

"Hmm," he answered absently.

"Sometimes doing something crazy calls for a price." She leaned forward.

"Not this time, Ashley," he gloated, making the one move that would cost her the game. "Check."

Ashley stared at the chessboard with a sense of unreality. There was only one move she could make.

"Checkmate."

*

TUCKING HER Bible into her backpack the next morning, Ashley stepped outside to lock her door. The shiny new red car was parked beside Milligan in front of her apartment.

As the first drops of rain lazily fell to the ground, she thought that even God seemed to be on Cooper's side. She had either to change into her rain gear or drive the car. She chose the latter. Pulling out of the parking lot she was forced to admit the car handled like a dream. Ashley was prepared to hate it, but she soon acknowledged that she was going to love this vehicle. Just as much as she loved the man who had given it to her.

Ashley was the Sunday School teacher for the three-year-olds, so John Lessinger would be in her class.

Claudia dropped him off at her classroom, then took young Scotty to the nursery. Ashley gathered the

children in a circle to sit on the patch of carpet in the middle of the floor. As she sat cross-legged, one of the shyer children seated herself in Ashley's lap. "I'm glad we're all together," she sang in a sweet voice. "Because Jesus is here and teacher's here and..."

"Cooper's here," Claudia, who had returned to check on John, chimed in softly.

The song died on her lips as she looked over at the tall, compelling figure in the doorway. His attention was centered on Ashley, the little girl in her lap. For a moment he seemed to go pale, then without a word, he pivoted and left the room.

"I'd better see what he wanted," Claudia said.

Ashley didn't see either of them again until it was time for the service. The four adults sat together, Claudia separating her from Cooper. How had Claudia gotten him to attend church? It wasn't all that long ago he had scoffed at her friend's new found faith. Had Seth had some influence?

Just as the pastor stepped in front of the congregation to light the third candle of the Advent wreath, a loud cry came from the nursery.

"Scotty," Claudia whispered to Ashley, then made her way out of

the pew. Cooper closed the space between them.

Never had Ashley been more aware of a man's presence. When he turned and looked at her, an unfamiliar quality had entered his eyes. He smiled, one of those rare smiles that came from his heart and nearly stopped hers. Quickly turning her face away, she squeezed her eyes closed and the pastor, the service, all was lost as Cooper closed his hand over hers. In all the years she had loved Cooper, Ashley had never dared to dream that he would sit beside her in church, or share her strong faith.

His grip remained tight and firm until Claudia returned to the pew. Immediately Cooper released Ashley's hand. The happiness that touched her so briefly was gone. He seemed content to hold her hand, as long as no one knew.

Once again she was forcefully reminded of the differences between them. He was a corporate manager, a powerful, wealthy man. She was just a schoolteacher. She was certain he cared for her, but not enough to admit it openly. She was an embarrassment to him. That had been clear from the beginning. Why did it hurt so much to admit it now?

"IS THERE something drastically wrong with me?" she asked Claudia later the next day. She'd stopped by after school for a short visit before Cooper returned from work.

Claudia looked up from bouncing Scotty on her knee. "Heavens, no. What makes you ask?"

"I want to get married and have children. I'm twenty-six and not getting any younger."

"I'm sure there are plenty of men out there who'd be interested. Only yesterday Seth was saying how pretty you've gotten. Surely there's someone..."

"That's just it." Ashley couldn't mention Cooper. "There isn't, and I found a gray hair the other day."

"Both you and Cooper. Have you noticed how he's getting gray along his sideburns? Oh, before I forget, Seth and I have been invited to a dinner party this Friday. We were wondering if you could watch the boys. If you have plans, just say so."

"What about Cooper?"

"He's got some appointment he can't get out of."

It was the night of the school party, so he had been telling the truth. It was as if the birds had begun to chirp and a happy song burst free from Ashley's heart.

"I'd love to stay with John and Scott," she said. "We'll have a

wonderful time, won't we, boys?" Neither one looked especially pleased. Glancing at her watch, Ashley stood. "I've gotta scoot, I'll see you Friday. What time?"

"Is six too early? I'll try to get the boys fed and dressed."

CLAUDIA WAS dressed in a mauve-colored chiffon evening gown that was a stunning complement to her auburn hair and cream coloring.

"Here's the phone number of the restaurant," Claudia told Ashley. "I've left a baby bottle in the refrigerator, but I've already nursed Scotty, so he probably won't need it."

"Okay," she said.

"Both boys are dressed for bed, don't let either of them stay up past eight-thirty. Call if you have any problems, won't you?" Claudia made her promise. "Scotty will cry the first few minutes after we've left, but he should quiet down so don't panic."

"I never panic," Ashley assured her.

True to form, Scott gave out a hearty cry the minute the door was closed.

"It's all right. Look, here's your teddy."

Scotty took the stuffed animal, threw it across the room, and cried all the louder.

Ten minutes passed and nothing seemed to calm him. Then John looked ready to start howling.

"Come on, Scout, not you, too."

"I want my mommy."

"Let's pretend I'm your mommy," Ashley offered.

Pacing the floor, she glanced up to find Cooper standing in the entryway watching her.

"Look, Johnny, Scott," Ashley said. "Uncle Cooper's here."

Both boys cried harder, spurring Cooper into action.

"What's the matter, fella?" he asked John in an assuring tone.

"I want my mommy," John wailed.

"They went out for the evening," Ashley explained, both hands supporting Scott as she paced the floor.

"What about your party?" Cooper asked. "You mean you didn't go because you'd promised to baby-sit?"

Ashley confirmed the statement with a weak nod, as Scotty belled louder.

Cooper frowned. "Is he sick? I've never heard him cry like that."

"No, just unhappy. Claudia said she'd left a bottle for him."

All four moved into the kitchen and when the bottle was warmed,

Ashley led the way back to the living room.

She sat in the polished wooden rocker and gently swayed back and forth. Scotty reached for the bottle and held it himself, sucking greedily. Her eyes filled with tenderness. The room was blissfully silent at last.

Johnny crawled into Cooper's lap and handed him a book that he wanted read. Cooper complied, and Ashley found her attention drawn again and again to the man and the young boy. A surge of love came so strong and overpowering that tears formed in her eyes. Hurriedly, she looked away.

Finished now, Scotty tossed the bottle aside, struggling to sit up. "Do you think I should burp him?" Ashley said.

In response, Cooper stood. "I've got a baby book around somewhere. Maybe it'd be best to look it up."

The small party moved into Cooper's den, where he found the volume, but just as Ashley and Cooper bent over to read, Scotty burped loudly.

"Well I guess that answers that, doesn't it?"

Scotty cried when Ashley placed him in the crib. She stayed several minutes attempting to comfort him, but to no avail.

"Claudia said something about rocking him to sleep," she told Cooper.

"No problem," he said with a sly grin. He fetched the wooden rocker from downstairs.

"Will you pray with me, Uncle Cooper?" Johnny requested, kneeling at his bedside.

Cooper joined the little boy on the navy carpet.

For the second time that night, Ashley was emotionally stirred at the sight of this man with the child.

"God bless Mommy, Daddy, and Scotty," John prayed, his head bowed, his small hands folded. "And Uncle Cooper, Auntie Ash, and all the angels. And I love you, Jesus, and amen."

"Amen," Cooper echoed softly.

Scotty had his eyes closed as he lay secure in Ashley's arms. Cooper was sitting on the mattress beside Johnny.

"Night, night, Auntie Ash," he whispered.

Ashley blew him a kiss. Johnny pretended to catch it, pulled his stuffed animal close, and rolled over.

The moment was serene and peaceful. Assured that Scotty was asleep, she stood and gently put him into the crib. Cooper came to stand at her side, but neither spoke, afraid of destroying the tranquility.

He paused at the bottom of the stairs, and turned, halting her descent.

"Ashley," he whispered, his look dark and troubled.

A tremor ran through her at the perplexing expression in his eyes and she slipped her arms around his neck.

"Ashley," he repeated. The husky sound was a gentle caress and he crushed her to him, his arms hugging her waist as his lips sought hers. The kiss again brought that jolt of awareness so strong it seemed to catch them both off guard. When his mouth broke from hers, Ashley could hear the heavy thud of his heart.

He loosened his hold, bringing his hands up to her neck, weaving long fingers through her hair. His lips soothed her chin and temple, and she gloried in the tingling sensations that spread through her.

"I'm sorry about the party to-night," he murmured.

Lovingly, her hand traced the proud line of his jaw, the tiny cleft in his chin. Unable to resist, she kissed him there and loved the sound of his groan.

"Ashley," he warned, "please, it's hard enough keeping my hands off you."

"It is? Really? Oh, Cooper, really?"

"Yes, so don't tease." A hand curved around her waist as he brought her down the last step. "Have you eaten?"

"No, I didn't have time. You?"

"I'm starved, maybe we can find something in the kitchen."

Ashley couldn't see why they needed to look. Her mother cooked for him. "Mom..."

"I gave her the rest of the month off," he explained.

"Well in that case, I vote for pizza. All we need to do is phone."

"Amazing." He tilted his head. "Is this something you and this Webber fellow do often?"

A denial rose to her lips, but she swallowed it back. "Sometimes. And his name is Dennis Webb."

The corner of his mouth formed a half-smile. "Sorry." But he didn't look the least bit repentant.

After placing their order, she turned and smiled. "Shall we play a game of chess while we're waiting?"

His look was faintly mocking. "I have a feeling I shouldn't?"

"Why not?" she asked.

"No wagers," he insisted.

"You take all the fun out of it," she said.

He chuckled as his hand gripped hers, leading them into his den.

While she set up the board, Cooper lit the logs in the fireplace. At mid-game the advantage

was Ashley's. The doorbell interrupted their concentration.

Cooper answered and returned with a huge flat box. "You ordered enough for a family of five," he told her.

"You said you were hungry," she argued, eyes brightening as she moved and captured his knight.

"How'd you do that?" Cooper's expression became serious. "I don't want to stop now. We can eat later."

"I'm hungry," she insisted.

He waved her away. "You go ahead and eat then."

She left the room and returned a minute later with plates and napkins, sitting on the floor in front of the fire. The aroma of melted cheese and bacon filled the room. "Yum, this is delicious," she said.

A frown creased his brow. "You're eating in here," he said.

"I'm not supposed to?" She was always doing something she shouldn't where Cooper was concerned. Pizza on the floor made her look childish and gauche.

His expression softened. "It's fine, I'm sure. It's just that I never have."

"Oh." She felt close to tears and bowed her head. The pizza suddenly tasted like glue. Closing the lid, she put her things away. "The carpet is probably worth a for-

tune. I wouldn't want to do anything to ruin it."

A finger under her chin raised her eyes to his. "Don't go," he whispered and gently laid his mouth over hers.

His kiss had been unexpected, catching her off guard, but she became a willing victim.

"You're right," Cooper murmured. "The pizza does taste good." He lowered himself onto the floor beside her and took a piece. "Delicious," he agreed.

"Can I have a taste?" she asked, and he held out the triangular wedge. Ashley carefully took a bite.

"Thank you," she told him.

With slow, deliberate movements, he placed the pizza box, plates, and napkins aside and reached for her.

Ashley moved willingly into his arms. Sliding her hands around his neck, she raised her face, eager for his attention. Her mouth was trembling in anticipation when he claimed it. A feeling of warmth wove its way through her and seemed to touch Cooper as the kiss deepened.

Somewhere, a long way in the distance, a bell began to chime. Fleeting, Ashley wondered why it had taken so long to hear bells when Cooper kissed her.

Abruptly, he broke away, grumbling, and briefly touched his mouth to her cheek before he stood and answered the phone.

"It's Claudia," Cooper said and Ashley stood.

"Ash, I'm sorry," Claudia began. "I didn't know Cooper was going to show. Is everything okay?"

"Wonderful."

"You two aren't arguing, are you?"

"Quite the contrary," she murmured.

"Seth and I may be several hours yet. If everything's peaceful, then don't feel you have to stay. I'm sure Cooper can handle anything if the boys wake up. But they probably won't."

"Okay," she agreed. "I'll talk to you later."

The sound of Claudia's soft laugh came over the line. "I don't think I need to. Take care."

Cooper nuzzled his chin along the top of her head. "Let's finish our dinner," he suggested, taking her hand and leading her back to the fireplace.

They ate in contented silence. Cooper paused once to ask a question. "Do you pray?"

The question was completely unexpected.

"Yes," Ashley responded. "What makes you ask?"

He shrugged, but Ashley had the impression he was far more interested than he wanted to admit. "This is the first time I've eaten pizza on the floor with a beautiful woman."

"Beautiful woman?" she teased. "Where?"

His eyes were more serious than she had ever seen them. "You," he answered.

"There are a lot of things I haven't done in my life. Prayer is one of them. Tonight when Johnny had me get down on my knees with him..." He let the rest of what he was going to say fade. "It felt right."

A baby's frantic cry broke into their conversation. "Scotty," Ashley said. "I'll go see what's wrong."

Scotty was standing in the crib, holding on to the sides. His cry grew louder as Ashley hurried in.

"What's wrong, Scotty?" she asked, and lifted him out of the crib, hugging him close. Checking his diaper, she noted that he wasn't wet. Probably he'd been frightened by a nightmare. She sat in the rocking chair again and rocked until she was sure he was back to sleep. With a kiss on the top of his head she placed him into his bed.

Cooper was waiting for her downstairs.

"He's asleep," she whispered.

"I made coffee. Would you like a cup?"

She smiled her appreciation. Again he curved an arm around her narrow waist, bringing her close to his side as he led her back into the den. The silver tea service was set on his desk. Ashley noted that the remains of their dinner had been cleared away as their chess game had been. She decided not to comment.

Cooper poured the steaming liquid into china cups, bringing her one. Her hand shook as she accepted it. Dainty pieces of delicate china made her nervous, and she would have much preferred a ceramic mug.

"This set is lovely," she said, holding the cup in one hand. Tiny pink rosebuds, faded with age, decorated it and the matching saucer.

"It was my grandmother's," he said proudly. "There are only a few of the original pieces left."

"Oh." Her index finger tightened around the porcelain handle, but her hand wobbled and the boiling hot coffee sloshed into her lap, immediately soaking the thin corduroy jeans. With a gasp of pain, Ashley stood, but the saucer flew out of her lap and smashed against the leg of the desk.

"Ashley, are you all right?" Cooper was on his feet.

Stunned, she couldn't move. "I'm so sorry," she said.

"Damn the china," he shouted. "It doesn't matter, none of it."

"It matters," she cried. "Very much."

"You've got to get that hand in ice water. What about your leg? Is it badly burned?" He almost dragged her into the kitchen.

"Cooper, please, listen to me. I'm so sorry."

"Keep that hand under the water," he shouted. He was at the refrigerator, taking out a tray of ice cubes.

Ashley closed her eyes.

"What about your leg?" he demanded.

"It's fine." She tilted her chin upward to stop the flow of tears. The long, blond curls spilled over her shoulder. The burns didn't hurt, but how could she have been so stupid? His grandmother's china... only a few pieces left.

"I swear I'll replace the saucer. I'll contact an antique dealer, I promise..."

"Ashley, stop." His firm hands squeezed her shoulders. "Stop right now. I don't care about a stupid saucer. But I care about you." His grip tightened.

She started to tremble and with a muted groan Cooper hauled her into his arms.

"Honey, it doesn't matter. Please believe me."

She held on to him so hard, because only the warmth of his touch could ease the shaft of cold that pierced her heart. She loved Cooper Masters so much it had become a physical pain. Never before had she realized how wrong she was for him. Cooper needed someone who...

"Ashley, look at me." He sounded gruff, impatient.

But Ashley was determined, and she shook herself loose, then swayed against him. He found her lips and kissed her with a desperation she hadn't experienced from him. It was as if he needed to confirm what he was saying, to comfort her, assure her. Ashley could accept none of it. But one minute in Cooper's arms and it didn't matter. All she could do was feel. The kindling fire of her love sent its warmth through her.

Cooper's hands roamed her back as he buried his face in her hair. "Let's sit down."

He took her into the living room and set her down in the soft comfort of the large sofa. Next, he opened the drapes to a spectacular view of Puget Sound.

Hands in his pockets, he paused to admire the beauty. "Sometimes in the evening I sit here, staring into the sky, counting the stars."

He spoke absently. "It's times like this that make me regret not having a wife and family. I've worked hard, and what do I have to show for it? An expensive home and no one to share it with." He stopped and turned, their eyes meeting, then slowly looked back to the window.

His action troubled Ashley. What was he telling her? She didn't understand, but she did realize that he had revealed a part of himself others didn't see.

Unfolding her long legs, she joined him at the window and slipped an arm around his waist, as if she'd done it a thousand times.

He smiled at her then, and Ashley couldn't remember seeing anything transform a face more than Cooper's smile. Then he brushed her temple with a light kiss.

"Do you have your Christmas tree up yet?"

"No," she whispered. "I thought I'd put it up tomorrow."

"Would you like some help?"

"I'd... I'd love some."

"Why don't we make a day of it?" Cooper suggested. "I'll pick you up, say around ten. We can do some shopping, go for lunch, and then decorate your tree."

"That sounds wonderful. I'd like that very much."

"And, Ashley," Cooper said. "I was thinking about buying myself

a pair of cowboy boots and wanted to ask your advice about where to go."

"I know just the store, in the Pavilion near Southcenter. But be warned, they're expensive." As soon as the words were out, Ashley regretted them. Cooper didn't need to worry about money.

He chuckled. "I wish other people were as reluctant to spend my money."

*

"WAS COOPER with you on Saturday?" Claudia asked as she laid the menu aside.

Most of the day had been spent finishing their Christmas shopping. For the past two hours Ashley had dragged Claudia to every antique store she could find.

"What makes you ask?" A peculiar pain knotted her stomach as it did every time she suspected Cooper didn't want anyone to know they were seeing one another. The entire day had been spent with him. After decorating the tree they'd gone out to dinner and a movie. It was midnight before he kissed her good night. Yet he hadn't told Claudia anything.

"What makes me ask?" Claudia repeated. "You mean beside the fact he disappeared for the entire day? Then, he saunters in late,

with a sheepish look. Gets up early Sunday morning whistling—Cooper whistling. He even went to church with us again."

"What makes you think I had anything to do with it?"

"What is it with you two? You'd think you were ashamed to be seen with one another. Look at how elusive you're being. Were you or were you not with Cooper Saturday?"

"Yes, I was with him all day."

"Ash?" Claudia hesitated. "You're in love with Cooper, aren't you?"

A small smile played over her mouth. "Yes." She nodded. It felt good to say it finally. "Very much."

Claudia's eyes glinted with happiness. "Who would ever have guessed? I can't imagine any two people more different."

"I know."

"Has he told you he loves you yet?"

"No, but then I'm not exactly an 'up town' girl, am I?" The words sounded more flippant than she'd intended.

"Ashley," Claudia snapped. "I can't believe you'd say that. You're closer to me than any sister..."

"It's not you," Ashley interrupted. "Cooper doesn't like to be seen with me."

"That's pure nonsense," Claudia insisted.

"I wish it was," she stated in a more serious tone.

Their salads arrived, and the conversation halted as they began to eat.

"You're planning to come with us Wednesday, aren't you?" Claudia asked.

"Is that the day you're taking the boys to Seattle Center Enchanted Forest? That's Christmas Eve day."

"Brilliant deduction," Claudia teased. "Cooper's going," she added.

The blond curls bounced about her head as Ashley laughed. "I'd be excited about it even if he wasn't."

"Cooper's been asking Seth a lot of questions," Claudia announced unexpectedly.

"About what?"

"The Bible." Claudia put her fork down. "They spent almost all afternoon yesterday discussing things. When I talked to Seth later, he told me that he felt inadequate because some of Cooper's questions were complicated. He can't seem to accept that salvation is not something we can earn with donations or good works."

"I can understand that," Ashley defended him. "Cooper has worked hard all his life. Nothing's

been free. I can see why it would be difficult for him to accept."

Claudia smiled. "You really do love him, don't you?"

"I'll tell you something else," Ashley said. "I've loved him since I was sixteen."

Claudia's expression softened. "Now are *you* ready?" She didn't wait for a response. "Cooper's been in love with you since before I married Seth."

"That I don't believe," Ashley argued. "If he felt that way four years ago, why didn't he make an effort to see me in that time?"

A lock of auburn hair fell across Claudia's cheek. "Knowing Cooper, that isn't so hard to understand."

"I wish I could believe it, I really do."

Claudia reached across and squeezed Ashley's forearm. "I've been waiting four years to give you the kind of advice you gave me. Go for him, Ash. Cooper needs you."

JOHNNY CRAWLED into Ashley's lap, beside Scott. "Can we play a game now, Auntie Ash?"

Ashley had told Claudia she'd watch the boys while she wrapped Christmas presents.

"What kind of game?"

"Horsey. Uncle Cooper let me ride him and Scotty and Daddy were the other horsey."

She smiled. "But I wouldn't be a good horse for both you and Scotty," she told him gently.

A disappointed look clouded the expressive young face, just as Scotty squirmed out of her arms and on to the thick carpet, crawling with all his might toward the Christmas tree. Ashley hurriedly intercepted him and swept him high up above her head. Scotty gurgled with delight.

The front door closed, and Ashley turned to find Cooper shaking the rain from his hat. "Hi," she said.

A surprised look crossed his dark features, almost as quickly replaced with one of welcome that sent her heart beating erratically.

"Claudia and Seth left you to the mercies of these two again?"

"No, they're wrapping presents."

He hung his coat in the hall closet and joined her, picking up Johnny.

"You know what Auntie Ash told us?" John said.

"I can only guess," Cooper replied.

"She said if Jesus hadn't been born, we wouldn't have Christmas."

"No, we wouldn't," Cooper agreed.

"I know something else we wouldn't have," she murmured.

Johnny's gaze followed hers. "Mistletoe!" he shouted.

Cooper's eyes hadn't left hers, and now, two quick strides carried him to her side. Her senses whirled as Cooper placed Johnny on the ground and gathered her in his arms, Scotty between them.

Cooper's gaze skidded to the baby.

"I'll take a rain check," she teased.

"But I won't," he announced, and gently set Scotty on the floor.

Ashley started to protest just as Cooper's mouth fit over hers. Winding her arms around his neck, she reveled in the feel of him.

The sound of someone clearing their throat had hardly registered with Ashley when Cooper abruptly broke off the kiss.

"You two forget something?" Claudia demanded. "Like Scotty and John?"

"Oh." Ashley gasped and looked around, remembering how the baby had responded to the Christmas tree.

Seth had lifted the baby by the seat of his pants, holding him several inches off the ground. Now he handed Claudia the baby, who cooed happily. "I've been meaning to ask you all day, what are you wearing to the party tomorrow?" she asked.

"The party?" Ashley was puzzled.

"Cooper's dinner tomorrow night," she said.

The world suddenly seemed to come to an abrupt stop. Her heart pounded frantically; the blood rushed to her face. But Claudia continued to elaborate, her words drifting away. All that penetrated were the words family... friends. Ashley was neither. The cook's daughter, nothing more. Breathing became painful as soundless tears scalded her face. Her gaze shifted to Cooper, but all she saw was the bitter regret. He hadn't wanted her to know.

"Ashley, are those tears?" Claudia said. "What's wrong?"

In a haze of pain, Ashley looked beyond the concerned face of her friend. Everyone she loved was there to witness her humiliation. Without a word she turned and walked out of the house.

"Ashley." Cooper followed her, but by the time he reached her, she was in her car, the key in the ignition.

"Will you let me explain?" he shouted.

But he'd said it all without uttering a word. She wanted to tell him that, as she swallowed the searing pain.

THE PHONE was ringing when she entered her apartment.

"Yes," she snapped.

It was an antique dealer she'd spoken to earlier that day. "A friend of mine has the piece you're looking for," he told her.

"How soon can I pick it up?"

"Tomorrow if you like. The only problem is that his shop is in Victoria, up in Canada."

Ashley wouldn't have cared if it was in Alaska. Replacing Cooper's china saucer was of the utmost importance. He need never know. She could give the saucer to Claudia. After writing down the directions, she thanked the man and told him she'd put a check in the mail for his finder's fee.

Silence closed around her now. For weeks she'd tried to convince herself Cooper wasn't ashamed to be seen with her. The love she felt had blinded her to the truth.

The doorbell chimed.

"Ashley," Cooper shouted and pounded on the door. "At least let me explain."

Her heart was crying out, demanding that she listen, but she'd been too easily swayed by her love.

"Please don't do this."

Her resolve weakened. Cooper had never sounded more sincere. She whipped her rabbit skin jacket from the closet, stuck her arms in the sleeves and zipped it up. Then

she threw open the front door and stared defiantly at a shocked Cooper.

"You have three minutes." She held up her wristwatch.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"Two minutes and fifty seconds," she answered. "I'm going to Webb. He happens to like me. Me the person. It doesn't matter to him that my mother's some rich man's cook, or that my father's a laborer."

"Ashley," his voice softened. "It doesn't matter to me either. I'm sorry about the party, I wouldn't want to hurt you for the world. I didn't think you'd want to come. Mostly it's business associates..."

"Don't make excuses, I understand," she said. "I'm the kind of girl who enjoys pizza on the floor in front of a fireplace. I wouldn't fit in. That's what you're saying, isn't it?" Her eyes and throat burned with the effort to suppress the tears. "Your time's up. Now if you'll excuse me." She moved out the front door.

"I want you to be there tomorrow night," he told her as her key turned the lock.

"I don't see any reason to make an issue over it. I couldn't have come anyway, I'm working at the restaurant tomorrow night."

Frustration marked his features as he followed her into the parking lot. "Ashley."

"I'd like to stay and chat, but I have to be on my way. Goodbye, Cooper."

Ashley pulled out, intent on doing as she'd said. Webb was her friend and she needed him.

His car was in the driveway as she pulled in. He must have seen her arrive because he was at the front door.

"Ashley." He sounded surprised. "Are you all right? You look peaked. You're not crying are you?"

"Oh, Webb," she sobbed and walked into his arms.

He hugged her and patted her back like a comforting big brother, which was just what she wanted.

"You're in love with this Cooper, aren't you?" he said at last.

"I hate him," she countered quickly.

"Now that's a sure sign. I wasn't positive before, but that clinched it."

"Webb, don't tease," she pleaded.

"Who's joking?" He sat across the room from her. "I've seen it coming on the last couple of weeks. You know, if you love one another and really want things to work out, whatever's wrong will be cleared up. If not, then you have to

believe God has other plans for you.”

Ashley closed her eyes, opened them and sighed. “You know, one of the worst things about you is that you’re so darn logical. I can’t stand it. I’ve always said an organized desk is the sign of a sick mind.”

“And that, my friend, is one of the nicest things you’ve ever said to me.”

They talked for a bit longer, and Webb did his best to raise her spirits, even coaxing her to smile. Later they ordered pizza and played a game of Scrabble. Webb won royally and refused to discount the fact that her mind wasn’t on the game. When he walked her to the car, he kissed her lightly and waved as she left.

ASHLEY SLEPT fitfully, her heart heavy. The alarm went off at four-thirty, and she doubted that she’d gotten any rest. Connecting with the early ferry still meant a five-hour ride across Puget Sound to Victoria, British Columbia. The schedule gave her an hour to locate the antique shop, buy the plate, and connect with the next ferry. She’d barely have time to bathe and change for her job at Lindo’s Mexican Restaurant.

Ashley had visited the Victorian seaport many times, and its beauty had never failed to enthrall her.

She located the small antique shop without difficulty, though she paled visibly when the proprietor cheerfully informed her how fortunate she was to have found this rare piece and she read the sticker. Still, her pride made a hundred dollars for one small saucer sound like a bargain.

On the return trip home, Ashley stood at the railing until a freezing rain began to pelt the deck. Inside the warm cabin, she fell asleep, waking as they eased into the dock in Seattle.

An hour later, she smiled at Manuel, Lindo’s manager, as she stepped in the back door. Hanging her coat, she tied an apron around her waist.

“There’s someone to see you,” Manuel told her.

Ashley looked out front to see a stern-faced Cooper. His steel-hard eyes met hers.

Carrying ice water and the menu, Ashley approached Cooper. What was he doing here? What about the party?

Dark, angry sparks flashed from his gaze. “Where have you been all day?” he hissed angrily.

Ashley ignored the question. “The special today is chili verde. I’ll be back to take your order.”

"Don't walk away from me," he warned.

"Are you ready to order now?" She took out her pad.

"Ashley." His look was grim. "I've talked to the manager. He says he doesn't think tonight's going to be all that busy. I want you to come to the party."

"No," she said.

"Then I'm not leaving, I'll sit here all night if I must."

"But you can't, your guests..." she stopped.

"I won't go without you," he told her forcefully.

By seven-fifteen, she was pacing the floor, her resolve weakening. Cooper couldn't offend his associates this way. It could hurt him and his business.

She refilled his coffee cup, avoiding his gaze. "I don't have anything to wear."

"Cowboy boots are fine. I'll wear mine if you like." He captured her hand. "Nothing means more to me than having you at my side tonight."

"Oh, Cooper," she moaned. "All right."

"Thank God." She heard his muffled whisper. "I'll meet you at your place in five minutes."

Numbly she nodded. As it worked out he pulled in directly behind her.

"While you change, I'll phone Claudia."

Examining the contents of her closet, Ashley pulled out a wool blend dress with a Victorian flair. The antique lace inserts around the neck, bodice, and cuffs gave the white dress a formal look. The glittering gold belt matched her high heeled sandals.

Her fingers shook as she applied a light layer of makeup. After a moment of hurried effort, she gripped the edge of the small bathroom sink as she stopped to pray. It wasn't the first time today that she'd turned to God. More confident, she added a dab of perfume to the pulse points at her wrist and neck and stepped out to meet Cooper.

"You're beautiful." He looked shocked.

"Don't sound so surprised. I can dress up, too."

"You're a little pale. Come here, I can change that." And Cooper pulled her into his arms and kissed her. The demand of his mouth tilted her head back. His hand behind her back arched her against him.

Ashley's breath was caught, her hands poised on the broad expanse of his chest. His heartbeat hammered against her palm.

"There." He tilted his face. "Plenty of color now." Releasing

her, he held her coat open. "I'm afraid we're going to make something of a grand entrance. Everyone's arrived. Claudia said the hors d'oeuvres ran out fifteen minutes ago."

"Is my mother...?" She let the rest of the question fade.

"No, it's being catered." A hand urged her out the door.

"Oh, Cooper." She hurried back to fetch a wrapped package. "Here." She gave it to him.

"Do I have to wait for Christmas?"

"No. It's a replacement for the saucer I broke."

"My word, where did you ever find it?"

"Don't ask."

"Ashley." He turned her around to face him. "Is this what you were up to today?"

She nodded silently.

His mouth thinned as his look became distant. "I think I went a little crazy looking for you." He slipped an arm around her waist. "We'll talk about that later."

THE DINING ROOM table had been extended to accommodate forty guests. Ashley looked at the china, sparkling crystal, and the fir and candle centerpiece that extended the full length of the table. Everything was exquisite, and she was filled with a sense of awe. She

didn't belong here. What was she doing fooling herself?

Cooper sat at the head of the table, with Ashley to his right. Under normal circumstances she would have enjoyed the meal. The caterers also supplied four waitresses, and Ashley found herself watching them instead of engaging in conversation with Cooper or the white-haired man on her right. Once the salad plates were removed, they were served prime rib, fresh green beans, and new potatoes. Every bite and swallow was calculated, to be sure she would do nothing to call attention to herself. For dessert, cheesecake and fresh strawberries were served, but Ashley took only one bite, afraid she'd spill fruit on her white dress. Once, when she glanced up, she found Cooper watching her. If this was a test she was failing miserably. His look did not instill confidence.

When the meal was finished, Ashley couldn't recall ever being more relieved.

Cooper's hand was pressed to her waist, keeping her at his side as they moved into the living room. She didn't join in the conversation, only smiled and nodded at the appropriate times. An hour after the meal, her face felt frozen with a permanent smile.

A few of the guests started to leave. Grateful for the opportunity to slip away, Ashley murmured a friendly farewell and left Cooper to deal with his company.

The caterers were cleaning away glasses and ashtrays from the living room when he found her in the corner talking to Seth and Claudia.

"You don't mind if we head upstairs, do you?" Seth asked.

"No, no, go ahead." He sounded preoccupied as he motioned toward his den. "We'll be more comfortable in there," he said to Ashley.

"Oh—" Claudia paused halfway up the stairs and turned. "Don't forget tomorrow morning, we'll pick you up around ten. The boys are looking forward to it."

"I am, too," Ashley added.

They entered the familiar den and Cooper closed the door, gesturing toward a chair. Ashley sat down, her back straight. She couldn't recall ever having seen him look more tired.

"Cooper, are you feeling all right? You're not sick?"

"Sick?" he repeated slowly. "...no."

"You look like you've lost your best friend."

"In some ways, I think I have." He moved over to his desk.

"How do you feel about the way things went tonight?" he asked finally.

"What do you mean? Was the food good? It was excellent. Do I like your friends? I found them to be cordial...and a bit overwhelming. Cooper, you have to remember I'm just an ordinary schoolteacher."

The pencil he was holding snapped in two. "You know, I'm sick of hearing how ordinary you are."

"What do you mean?"

"You ran to a corner to hide every chance you got. You wouldn't even lift a fork until you'd examined the way three other people were holding theirs."

"Is that so bad?" she flared. "I felt safe in a corner."

"I think that tells me everything I want to know."

"You forced me into coming tonight," she said.

"It was a no-win situation. You understand that, don't you?"

"There's very little I understand about you anymore."

"I didn't invite you tonight for a reason," he said.

"Do you think I don't already know that?" she flashed bitterly.

"I don't fit in with this crowd."

"That's not why," he shouted.

"If you raise your voice to me again, I'm leaving." Tears welled

in her eyes. "It's not the first time either, is it?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The first time we went out, you chose a small Italian restaurant. I thought you didn't want to be seen with me."

"You can't believe that?" His eyes showed disbelief.

"Even in church when you held my hand, it was done secretly."

A tense silence enclosed them.

"You've thought that all this time?"

She nodded. "I don't know about you, but I'm tired. I want to go home."

He opened the door wordlessly and went to retrieve her coat. He didn't say a word until he pulled up in front of her apartment building. "I find it amazing that you could think all those things, yet continue to see me."

"Now that you mention it, so do I," she replied.

His mouth thinned, but he didn't retaliate.

She handed him her apartment key, and he unlocked the door.

When he glanced up, their eyes met and held. "It's not true, Ashley, none of it." With that he turned and left.

*

"ARE YOU READY, Auntie Ash?" Johnny bounded into her apartment excitedly the next morning.

"You bet." She gave her godson a big hug.

"Daddy's in Uncle Cooper's car," John added.

Ashley straightened. "Where's Cooper?"

"He decided at the last minute not to come. What happened with you two last night?" Claudia asked.

"Why?"

Claudia glanced at her son. "We'll talk about it later."

The downtown Seattle area was crowded with last minute shoppers. Luckily, Seth found a parking place on the street, then retrieved the stroller for Scotty from the trunk.

"Can I put the money in the meter?" Johnny asked.

Ashley handed him some quarters and dimes and lifted him up so that he could reach the slot.

"Good boy," she praised him, and he beamed.

They caught the monorail that had been built as part of the World's Fair in 1962, soon arriving in the heart of the Seattle Center a few blocks from the Food Circus.

The boys squealed with delight the minute they spied the Enchanted Forest. Scotty pointed to the kiddie-size train that traveled between artificial trees.

"Are you hungry?" Seth wanted to know.

"I wouldn't object to cotton candy," said Claudia.

"And I had to ask," Seth teased, lovingly brushing his mouth over his wife's cheek.

Someday, Ashley wanted Cooper to look at her like that. More than anything else, she wanted to share her life with him, have his children.

"Ash, are you all right?"

She shook her head. "Of course, what made you ask?"

"You looked so sad."

"I am, I..."

"My goodness, Ash, look, Cooper's here."

"Cooper?" Her spirits soared. "Where?"

"Across the room." She pointed, then waved when he saw them. His level gaze crossed the crowded room to hold hers.

"I'm going to do it," Ashley said, and started toward him.

They met halfway.

"Ashley."

"I want to talk to you," she said sternly.

"I want to talk to you, too."

"Wonderful. Let me go first."

He looked at her blankly. "All right," he agreed.

"You asked me last night why I still saw you if I believed those things I confessed. I'll tell you why. I love you, Cooper Masters, and if you don't love me, I think I'll die."

"That's not the kind of thing you say to a man in a public place." His gaze studied hers, softening.

"I apologize, but I couldn't hold it in any longer."

"Why couldn't you have told me last night?"

Oblivious to the crowds milling around, they stared at one another.

"Because I was afraid, and you were so..."

Cooper rubbed his eyes. "Don't say it, I know how I was."

"When you weren't with Claudia this morning, I didn't know what to think."

"I couldn't come. Not when you believed that I could ever be ashamed of you."

"I was afraid. Sounds silly doesn't it?" She didn't wait for his answer. "Afraid if I forced you to admit it, I wouldn't see you again. I couldn't face the truth if it meant losing you."

Slowly he shook his head. "I can understand how you came to that conclusion, but you couldn't be

more wrong. I love you, Ashley, I..."

"Cooper, oh, Cooper," she cried excitedly and threw her arms around him.

As he hungrily devoured her lips Ashley could hear the people around them, but she wouldn't have cared if they were in Grand Central Station. Cooper loved her. She'd prayed to hear those words and nothing was going to ruin her pleasure.

When he dragged his mouth from hers, his husky voice breathed against a cloud of her blond hair. "Do you promise to do that every time I say I love you?"

"Yes, oh, yes," she said with a joyous smile.

He cleared his throat self-consciously. "Don't look now, but Claudia and company are headed our way."

Reluctantly, Ashley dropped her arms and stepped back. Cooper pulled her close to his side.

"Is everything okay with you two?" Claudia's gaze went from one to the other. "If that embrace was anything to go by, I'd say things are looking much better."

"You could say that," Cooper agreed, his eyes holding Ashley's. "But there are several things we need to discuss. If you don't mind, I'm going to take Ashley with me.

We'll all meet back at the house later."

Claudia and Seth exchanged knowing looks. "We don't mind," Seth answered for them.

A half hour later, Cooper pulled into the driveway of his home.

"Coffee?" he suggested as he hung her coat.

"Yes." She nodded eagerly. "But, Cooper, could I have it in a mug? I'd feel safer."

When the coffee was ready, he carried two ceramic mugs into the den on a silver platter.

Ashley smiled. "Compromise?"

"Compromise," he agreed, handing her one.

Ashley held it with both hands. "I have a feeling I know what you're going to say."

"I doubt that very much, but go ahead."

"No." She shook her head. "I've put my foot in my mouth so many times, for once I'm content to let you do the talking."

"We seem to have the penchant for saying the wrong thing to one another, don't we?" His look was thoughtful as he straightened and sat up in the leather winged back chair. "I think it's important to clear away the misunderstanding about the party. Ashley, when I saw how hurt you were to be excluded, I can't remember feeling

worse. I wanted you there, from the first, but I felt you would be uncomfortable. Those people are a lot like me."

"But I love you," she interrupted.

"I didn't know that at the time. I didn't want to do anything that would make you feel ill-at-ease. Thrusting you into my world could have destroyed our promising relationship, and that was far more important to me. Now I realize what a terrible mistake that was."

"And the other things?" She had to know, had to clear away any reasons for doubt.

"I did those things because I thought you wouldn't want to be associated with me."

"Oh, Cooper," she groaned at her own stupidity. "And I was so miserable."

His kiss was sweet and filled with the awe of the discovery of her love. "Things being what they are, maybe you should open your Christmas gift now."

"Oh, could I?"

"I think you'd better." He opened the closet and brought out a large, beautifully wrapped box, which he placed on her lap. Ashley untied the red velvet bow and hesitated.

"My gift to you is at home," she said, "but I'm making you wait until Christmas."

"Maybe I should make you wait, too," he teased.

"No," she objected, gripping her package.

"No." The teasing light left his eyes. "It's important that you open this now," he said, and then he kissed her, his lips a light caress across her brow.

Ashley's fingers shook as she pulled back the paper and lifted the lid of the box. Inside, nestled in white tissue, was a large family Bible.

"A Bible," she murmured, her gaze probing his.

"I've thought a lot about how important your faith is to you. I wanted to have a strong faith for you, because of my love. But there were so many things I didn't understand. If Christ paid the price for my salvation with His life, then how can it be of value if all I have to do is ask for it?" He stood and walked across the room. "Last Sunday in church I was waiting for the service to begin and I asked God to help me. After the service I saw the car I had given you in the parking lot. Suddenly I knew."

Ashley had been at church, but taught Sunday School and then helped in the nursery. She hadn't seen Cooper.

"My car? How did my car help?"

"It sounds crazy, I know," he admitted. "But I gave it to you freely, without reimbursement, knowing that you couldn't afford a car. My gift to you, because I love you. It suddenly occurred to me that was exactly why Christ died for me. He paid the price because I couldn't. And now I've made my commitment to Christ," he told her.

"Oh, Cooper." She smiled up at him.

"That's not all."

An overwhelming happiness stole through her.

"Do you recall that time I stepped into your Sunday school class?" He looked away as a glossy shine came over his dark eyes. "You were on the floor with a little girl sitting in your lap."

"I remember."

"You looked up and your blue eyes softened and in that moment I imagined you holding another child. Ours. Never have I felt an emotion so strong. If I hadn't turned around and walked away, I don't know what I would have done."

Ashley thought her heart would burst with an unrestrained joy. "Our children."

"Yes." Cooper knelt beside her and took the Bible out of its box, opening the first pages. "I got this

one for a reason. I've written our names here and I'm asking that we fill them out together."

Ashley looked down at the portion of the Bible set aside to record a family history. Both of their names were entered under "Marriage", the date left blank.

"Will you marry me, Ashley?" he asked.

The lump of joy in her throat prevented her from doing anything but shaking her head. "Yes," she finally said. "Yes, Cooper," and with that she flung her arms around his neck and spread kisses over his face as tears slid down her face.

Cooper's arms surrounded her, holding her closer. His mouth found hers in a lingering kiss that cast away all doubts and misgivings.

The sound of footsteps in the hall turned their attention to the world outside the door.

Cooper stood, and extended a hand toward her. "I don't think either Claudia or Seth will be surprised by our announcement. Or your family for that matter."

"My family?"

"I talked to your parents yesterday. They've given us their blessing. I was determined to have you, Ash. I wouldn't want to live my life without you now." He hugged her

tightly and curved an arm around
her waist. "Christmas. It's almost
too wonderful to believe. God gave

His Son in love. And now He's
given me you."





**JOAN
HOHL**

**Christmas
Stranger**



Virginia and Matt seem destined to meet and fall in love. How else to explain the Christmas miracle that has brought him to her from another place—and time....



Montana
Christmas Eve, 1889

Drifting flakes of snow shimmered in the light at the window of a small, isolated cabin near the edge of town. Inside, a man stood peering into a cracked, wavy mirror, muttering to himself as he raked long fingers through his unruly, silver-sprinkled dark hair.

"Needs trimming." United States Marshal Matthew Hawk grimaced at his distorted reflection. "Needs washing, too." Critically narrowing his eyes, he stepped back to get a partial view of his tall, rangy form. The sight did not ease the frown from his brow.

Matt shrugged and turned away. If nothing else, his white shirt was clean and neatly pressed. Along with his black string tie, it gave the impression of respectability he was striving for.

What did it matter, anyway? He was a stranger in this small mining town in Montana's Anaconda Mountains. Except for the local sheriff and a few concerned citizens, nobody knew him. But it was

Christmas Eve, and it mattered because he was going to church. He, Matthew Hawk, a hunter of men, who hadn't been to church for over twenty years, was getting spruced up for the service at seven.

He had killed a man less than twenty-four hours ago, and he shivered now in response to a wave of revulsion at the memory. The fact that he had done it in the line of duty didn't negate his reaction, nor did the man's having been a particularly vicious outlaw. Matt's work as a peace officer had been causing him a mounting dissatisfaction for some months, and lately it bordered on despair.

Matt was thirty-five years old. He had spent ten of those years wearing a badge, tracking the lawless. The law-abiding citizens had to be protected from the aberrants who chose to walk on the wild side. It always meant violence that—more often than not—resulted in death.

Matt was increasingly certain that there had to be a better way. But what it was eluded him. Maybe, in another time, another place...

"Damn," Matt muttered, breaking into his fruitless musing. Was the mental torment the reason he had decided to attend the service? A wry smile touched his lips. He had to admit to himself that he had a lot of gall seeking solace in God's house after all these years.

But he was more than a lawman, Matt defended himself. He was a human being with needs and longings and dreams. He was tired of living on a horse. He wanted a home of his own, a wife, and, yes, God willing, a child of his own.

Since he had saved a large portion of his earnings, all paid in solid American gold coin, the first part of his dream—owning a small ranch—was within reach. It was definitely time for him to quit.

Matt checked his silver railroad watch. It was five of seven. If he was going, the time was now. But would he be welcomed by the ultimate Boss?

His answer came as he recalled a scene from his youth, squirming beside his mother on a hard church pew. How had the words gone?

Come unto me, ye who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Deciding that rest was surely the first of his needs, Matt shrugged into his woolen coat, settled his weathered Stetson low on his brow and left the cabin. Halfway to his

destination, the shouted sound of his name broke the silence.

"Hawk!"

Alarm splintered through Matt. Conditioned reflexes took over. He was moving before the echo of his name faded, but even as his pistol cleared the holster, a rifle shot rang out, shattering the illusion of a blessed and peaceful night.

Matt's body jerked from the force of the bullet that slammed into his chest. His eyes wide with shock, he felt his hand jam the pistol back into the holster. Darkness swirled through his mind. Then he was falling forward, his motion so slow that his hat remained firmly in place when he crashed, face first, into the cold cushion of snow.

The shock of cold brought a moment of lucidity. He was going to die! There would be no second chance, no new, decent life. No home. No wife. No child. There would be nothing.

His lips twisted into a wry grimace. This was not the kind of rest he'd had in mind.

As from a far distance, he heard the sound of church bells. No! No! Matt protested in silent anguish. He couldn't die. The thought was like a flicker of light in the encroaching darkness. Not tonight.

It was Christmas Eve, for God's sake!

*

Present Day

THE SNOW began to fall late in the afternoon of Christmas Eve, delighting the children. At first a gentle sprinkle of light flakes, by midevening the storm front had pushed its way over the Pocono Mountains to the small town of Conifer, Pennsylvania. And by the time the church bells pealed at midnight, over six inches of the glittering white stuff blanketed the town.

Driving through the swirling cloud of snow was hazardous for the most alert motorist, and Dr. Virginia Greyson was tired, which made negotiating the roads even worse.

Her day had begun at seven that morning with the first of three surgeries. She had seen patients in her offices until 6:00 p.m., then she rushed home for a quick shower and change, before heading out for a dinner engagement.

The secluded restaurant was the latest hot spot for the local professional group. Though she was herself something of a loner, Virginia's date was a member in good standing of that group.

Richard Quinter was a direct descendant of one of the town's founders, and heir to the Quinter family fortune, the product of innumerable insurance and real estate deals. As a personable and handsome bachelor of thirty-three, Richard was also the prime catch of the entire county of Hunter.

By rights it should have been a pleasant, relaxing evening for Virginia. It was Christmas and having scheduled a break for the holidays, she was free for ten days. Her only other invitation was for Christmas evening supper at Richard's parents' home.

Virginia liked Richard. He was interesting and fun to be with. But this had been different from their previous dates. Richard's conversation had suddenly shifted from casual to serious, his attitude taking on a possessiveness that set off warning bells. For Virginia was not in love with Richard, and by her choice they were not lovers. While she enjoyed his company, Virginia felt no inclination to deepen their relationship.

She was thirty-one years old, used to her freedom and in no hurry to change the status quo. Successful in her profession and financially secure, she sought neither love nor an affair. Now, at 12:27 on a snow-tossed Christmas morning, Virginia decided that the

last thing she needed was involvement, with Richard or any other man.

Gripping the steering wheel, she gritted her teeth and drove her car at a crawl along the deserted streets. Easing the car into a right turn, she immediately revised her decision. Two police cruisers were diagonally parked midway along the street, blue and red lights flashing.

What should she do? Should she back out to the intersection and continue home by a different route, or go and offer medical assistance?

Unconscious of the habit, she raked slender fingers through the honey-blond waves that cascaded to her shoulders. Her own principles limited her options to one. She was a physician—end of inner struggle. Sighing, she stepped out into the biting wind.

The harshly illuminated scene didn't fit the festive season. She recognized the four uniformed men standing in a semicircle around the body of a man sprawled in the snow.

"Eve'n, Dr. Greyson," said Patrolman Jeff Klein.

Virginia nodded. "What have you got here, Jeff, hit-and-run?"

"No." Jeff frowned. "We got a call about fifteen minutes ago from a couple of the residents reporting

sounds of rifle shots." He grimaced. "When we got here, we found him. He's got a bullet in his chest."

Virginia halted beside the still form. "Who is he?"

"Lord knows." Jeff shrugged. "We searched him, but couldn't find a scrap of identification. Just a watch and a badge, all old looking, like antiques."

The man was dressed strangely, the garb Western, but in the style of an earlier time. A dirty-gray Stetson cradled his head, its brim framing his face with its taut planes and the sharp angles of his bone structure. He had a long, straight nose, high, slashing cheekbones and a firm jawline. His hair was as scruffy-looking as his hat, though it appeared healthy.

A latter-day mountain man? she wondered. Her normally soft brown eyes widened at sight of the holstered pistol on his right thigh. A hunter of animals...and perhaps even men? Whichever, Virginia thought bleakly, he had been a handsome and virile-looking man.

Her gaze next fell on the large, dark red stain made by the gaping wound where the bullet had entered his chest, close to his broad shoulder. She did not know this man, yet Virginia felt a sudden,

inexplicable need to weep for the senseless waste of his life.

"He's got the coldest eyes I've ever seen," observed Patrolman Raymond Horsham.

Virginia shivered as she gazed down into the ice-blue eyes in question.

"Well, of course," retorted his partner. "He's dead."

Unable to wrench her gaze from the stranger's blank eyes, Virginia pulled off her gloves and sank to her knees in the snow. She reached toward his throat to confirm the absence of a pulse.

"I'm not dead."

Startled, she gasped and pulled back her hand. He was alive! She jumped to her feet even as her rattled senses took it in.

Without a thought for her own welfare, Virginia whipped off her full-length coat to cover him. She had no idea how long he had been lying there, but she knew he was in trauma and shock. She dropped to her knees again, raising a hand to his throat to take his pulse. His skin was cold to the touch, which made the sudden charge of heat that tingled up her arm all the more devastating.

Controlling an urge to pull back her hand, Virginia concentrated on the strong but erratic pulse at the base of his throat. Touching him, feeling his life throbbing against

her fingers, gave Virginia the strangest sensation she'd ever experienced. *What was this?*

Momentarily frozen, Virginia stared down at the man. She didn't hear the ambulance come to a stop or the dying wail of its siren. Trembling, stunned by the power of her reaction to this stranger, she watched as his eyelids slowly fell. When he opened them again, his eyes were clouded by confusion but focused. Now they were a vibrant diamond-bright blue.

"Ambulance chasing, Dr. Greyson?" one of the paramedics asked drolly.

Virginia didn't respond to the young man's wry question. "Please hurry," she said, stepping back. "This man has been shot in the chest, and he's lost a lot of blood."

Instantly the men were all business, and Virginia shrugged into her coat as she walked beside the litter to the ambulance.

"When you call in, tell the receptionist in the Emergency room to collect an OR crew for me," she said. "I'll be right behind."

THE MOTION of the vehicle jolted Matt into a blurred state of semi-consciousness. It was too smooth to be that of a wagon or buckboard. Yet he sensed that he was in some sort of conveyance.

But what form of conveyance could it be?

His eyelids were heavy. The most Matt could manage was to squint. The effort was exhausting, and he could see very little. Either it was night, or he was partially blind.

Where in hell was he?

Matt moved restlessly, painfully.

"Hang on, buddy, we're almost there."

Matt grew still at the sound of the voice. Questions tumbled through his mind.

They were almost where? And who was speaking? Why was his chest on fire? The final question sparked Matt's memory and he heard the echo of a voice calling his name.

"Hawk!"

Matt's body jerked. He had been shot... ambushed!

Was he dead?

Blackness invaded Matt's consciousness, and the question remained unanswered.

*

THE ANGEL was back.

Peering through remnants of anesthetically induced fog, Matt stared into her composed, beautiful face. She smiled.

"How are you feeling?"

Shock jolted through him at the soft sound of her voice. Did angels speak?

"Strange." Matt hardly recognized his own voice.

"It's the anesthetic," she said. "It'll wear off soon."

Anesthetic? What was that?

"I imagine you're thirsty," the voice said.

"Yes," he answered, wondering how he could feel physical discomfort if his body was dead.

"Here, this will help."

Matt felt her slip one hand beneath his head. She was touching him! And her hand was soft and warm... and strong! Then a secondary consideration hit him. His body! He still had a body! He still had feeling!

"Slowly now, take just a sip or two."

Cool water bathed his parched mouth and tickled down his throat.

"That's enough for now," the gentle voice cautioned.

Darkness began closing in on Matt. He groped with one hand until he made contact with one of hers. She felt real, solid. Exerting the last threads of consciousness, he murmured, "Don't leave me."

"I won't," her answer whispered to him.

FOR OVER TWO hours, Virginia sat on the uncomfortable chair by the

stranger's bed. She had little choice in the matter; her hand was imprisoned within his steel-like grip.

She was still sitting there, dozing fitfully, when Sally Wentworth, the head ICU nurse, came to say she was going off duty. Virginia came instantly alert, her first thought for her patient.

"He's doing remarkably well," Sal said softly.

"What time is it?" Virginia muttered.

"Exactly 7:06:22." Sal's smile held the warmth of friendship. "I couldn't leave without wishing you a Merry Christmas."

"Thanks, Sal. I wish you the same."

Sal laughed. "I don't believe I'm up to merry—I'm beat. I'll settle for peaceful. And you look about ready to cave in. What you need is about ten hours of sleep."

"I'm okay," Virginia murmured. "I rested for an hour or so after the surgery in the doctors' lounge."

"Wonderful." Sal inclined her head toward their patient. "His vital signs are good, and he's sleeping naturally. Why don't you leave him in the excellent care of the day crew?"

"Two reasons," said Virginia. "I promised him I wouldn't leave. And...he's got a death grip on my hand."

"So I see. Well, he'll probably be waking up soon. Oh, I almost forgot!" Sal exclaimed, picking up a clipboard. "I was asked to give you this."

"Admittance forms," Virginia muttered.

"Regulations, Doctor."

WHERE IN HELL was he?

Matt moved with restless agitation. Pain exploded in the upper right side of his body. Damn, he...

"Well, hello there. How are you feeling now?"

"My shoulder hurts," Matt answered.

"I'm afraid it will for a few days." Her smile was gentle. "Could I have my hand back, please?"

"No." Matt was afraid she'd escape if he let go.

"But I need it," she said. "Please let go."

With reluctance Matt released her.

"Thank you. Now I'm going to examine you."

"Examine me!" he exclaimed, eyes narrowing as she raised her hands to a device around her neck. "What is that thing?"

"It's a stethoscope," she explained. "Surely you've seen one before?"

"No," he admitted. "What does it do?"

"It allows me to monitor your heartbeat," she said.

Matt shivered. "It's cold," he said. "What do you hear?"

"A good strong beat," she responded. "And your lungs are clear. In fact, you're doing better than expected. Are you comfortable?"

"I'm thirsty. *And* hungry."

"That's an excellent sign. I'll give you some water, but you'll have to wait for food. They'll be moving you soon."

Matt felt a twinge of panic. "Where am I now?"

"Postop ICU."

Matt felt his expression go blank. "What's that?"

"Postoperative intensive care unit," she answered. "You're in a hospital. You had surgery five hours ago to remove a bullet from your chest."

Hawk! He had been bush-whacked!

Reliving the incident, Matt slid his right hand to his thigh, wincing as pain streaked up his arm and across his chest.

"Where is my gun?" His voice was as cold and deadly as his eyes.

She moved her shoulders in a delicate shudder. "It's with the rest of your things. They'll be returned to you."

Matt's mind was becoming clearer as the effects of the seda-

tion dissipated. "What in hell is this thing?" His hand moved to the tube fastened to the back of his left hand.

"Don't touch the IV!" The woman grasped his hand. "And don't strain your right arm. You could reopen that wound."

Matt's eyes narrowed even more. What was this woman talking about with all these initials? His lips tightening, he asked a point-blank question.

"Are you a nursing angel?"

"Nursing angel?" For a moment she appeared astonished. Then she laughed. "I'm neither a nurse nor an angel."

"Then I'm not dead...and in heaven?"

"No, you are not dead." She smiled.

"Then...where am I, and who are you?"

"You are in a hospital recovery room. And I am Dr. Virginia Greyson...the surgeon who removed the bullet from your chest."

His eyes flew wide, then narrowed again. "You are a doctor...a surgeon?"

Her eyebrows lifted. "Now, don't tell me you've never seen a woman physician before today."

Matt was about to tell her exactly that, when two women and a man suddenly surrounded the bed.

"Time to head 'em up and move 'em out, cowboy," the beefy, white-coated man drawled.

Wondering what the man was talking about, Matt shot a helpless look at his "angel."

"They're going to transfer you to another room," she explained.

"Why? What's wrong with this room?"

"Nothing," she answered. "But this room is for patients needing constant care. Now if you cooperate, I'll have someone get you something to eat as soon as you're settled."

Matt decided to cooperate—but not before gaining a concession from her. "Will you go with me?"

"Yes."

Matt liked his new quarters and said as much to Virginia, the moment the others had left the room. Then, "You promised me some grub," he reminded her.

"And I always keep my promises." Pivoting, she headed for the door. "I'll be back in a minute."

Matt glanced around her, wonder filling his mind at the clean, cheerful look of the place. He had never been inside a hospital before, but had heard about them. The most startling thing of all was to find this obviously large, new building in a dying town in the Montana foothills.

Frowning, his gaze settled on a small, windowed box set on a shelf. What the hell was that? he asked himself. He rested his head on the soft pillow and continued to stare at it.

When Virginia returned, he was sound asleep.

LESS THAN five minutes were required for Virginia to divest herself of the OR greens she was still wearing, and pull on the dress she had worn.... Had it really only been last evening?

Shrugging into her coat, she headed for the exit.

"Dr. Greyson, wait a minute!" It was the front desk receptionist. "About the man who came in through Emergency last night... I have no admittance forms on him."

Damn regulations, Virginia railed inwardly. "I know." She shrugged. "He hasn't been conscious long enough for me to get the information."

"Would you like me to send someone else for it?"

"No," Virginia said with emphasis. "I'll be back later this afternoon. I'll get it for you then." She gave a conspiratorial smile. "Do you think you can hold off Admissions until then?"

"I'll confuse them with over-worked vagueness," the woman said. "Merry Christmas, Doctor."

The greeting reminded her of her promise to have Christmas supper with Richard at his parents' house. He was to pick her up at six. But she had promised to return to the hospital that afternoon.

What to do?

Virginia worried the question like a dog with a bone during the short but tricky drive home.

Dropping her coat and handbag onto the nearest chair, Virginia began undressing as she walked to her bedroom. She needed sleep—about twelve hours' worth. But it was already 10:00 a.m.

She called her answering service, requesting a wake-up call for four. The second call was to Richard, canceling their date.

"I'm sorry, Richard," she said. "But I've always told you that my patients come first...on Christmas or any other day."

He objected.

She said a polite goodbye.

Minutes later Virginia was as sound asleep as her patient.

*

GOD!

Matt stared at the blond woman walking toward his bed. He had experienced a number of baffling

events since awaking an hour ago, but the appearance of this woman was the most puzzling of all.

Without doubt she was Virginia Greyson, and yet her appearance shocked him.

Her hair was loose. Her enticing lips were painted crimson and looked slick in the ceiling light. Gold hoops were fastened to her earlobes. A glittery bronze shaded her eyelids.

In comparison to the decent women of his acquaintance, who were all paint-free, she looked like a wanton.

She now wore a two-piece red thing—a short coat over a snow-white blouse, but it was the bottom of the two-piece thing that rattled Matt. It was a skirt—and it barely covered her knees.

Matt scored a scandalized glance down her shapely calves and trim ankles, his gaze resting on her black shoes, which had narrow heels at least three inches high.

Speculation gleamed from his bright blue eyes.

"Is something troubling you?" she asked.

"There's a whole hell of a lot of things troubling me," Matt replied. You could clear up the most urgent of them by climbing into this bed with me, he thought.

She was quiet for a moment, waiting, then arched her brows.

"Well? How are you feeling now?"

"Hungry. Maybe some folks call a swallow of broth, weak tea and a spoonful of jelly a meal, but I sure as hell don't," he snapped.

"But a soft diet is necessary because of the anesthetic," she explained. "Some patients experience nausea."

"I didn't," he said pointedly.

"What would you like?" she asked, rising from the chair.

"Something I can sink my teeth into," he answered, searching out the softest morsels of her body with a narrowed, raking glance.

Her flickering eyelashes indicated that his silent message had been received. "I'll... ah... see what I can do."

Virginia stood in the corridor outside the stranger's room. She felt breathless. What was it about this man that affected her so?

"Lost, Doctor?" a nurse asked.

"Er, no," Virginia said. "I was thinking."

"A problem with your patient?"

"Actually, yes," Virginia said. "He's hungry." She didn't relish telling him there'd be another half hour until dinner.

"We've got a fruit cake at the station," the nurse said. "I can give you a slice with a cup of coffee for him."

Virginia reentered the stranger's room a few minutes later with coffee and a thick slice of fruit cake.

"That's a meal?"

"No, but it will suffice until the dinner trays are served." She set the cup and plate on the bed tray and pressed the Up button to raise the head of the bed.

"Damn!" he exclaimed. "What kind of contraption is this?"

"It's a common hospital bed," she murmured.

"There ain't a damn thing common about it," he replied.

"You've never seen one?" Virginia asked.

"I've never seen a whole helluva lot of the things I've been seeing in this place," he retorted. "Like that." He flicked his hand to indicate the TV mounted on a shelf.

"The television?" Virginia frowned.

"Is that what it's called? What does it do?"

"You honestly don't know what a television is?"

His voice held an edge of panic. "Lady, I don't know what most of the things in this room are."

"Good grief!" Virginia stared at him. "You really were in the mountains a long time, weren't you?"

"Yeah," he agreed, "but—"

"Never mind," she interrupted him. "Drink your coffee before it

gets cold. I'll do my best to answer your questions after you've finished."

As she settled into the chair, her gaze fell on the clipboard lying atop the bedside cabinet. She sighed. "I promised to fill out these forms and get them down to Admissions this afternoon. They should have been filled out before you were admitted."

His lips curled. "Paperwork."

Virginia smiled and lowered her eyes to the form. "Name?" she asked.

"Matthew Hawk."

Virginia liked his name; somehow it fitted him. "Home address?"

"Fort Worth, Texas."

Virginia's head jerked up. "Occupation?"

"United States marshal."

"Really!" Virginia stared at him. "Date of birth?"

"June 13, 1854."

That does it! Virginia decided. She would not be the brunt of his humor any longer. Raising her head, she glared and met his clear-eyed stare.

He wasn't kidding!

The realization raised the hair on Virginia's scalp, and she had the weird sensation of having landed in the middle of the Twilight Zone. She cleared her tight throat. "You

do mean 1954... don't you?" she asked.

"1954?" He exploded with laughter. "Are you loco?"

"Are you telling me you are over a hundred years old?" she demanded.

His jaw dropped. "Lady, you're plain crazy!"

She shook her head. "I don't understand any of this."

"Well, you're not riding point alone," he growled. "I haven't understood anything since I woke up."

Virginia's heart was beating so rapidly that she could barely breathe. "O-okay," she said, "suppose we start at the beginning. How did your accident happen?"

"Accident, hell! I was bush-whacked," he said. "I was heading for the church at the top of the hill."

"What hill?" Virginia envisioned the level street.

"Here." He waved his arm. "In Montana."

"Mr. Hawk, I feel I must tell you that you are nowhere near Montana. You are in a hospital in the town of Conifer, Pennsylvania."

He grimaced with pain as he slid to the edge of the bed. "I am getting out of this madhouse," he said.

"No!" Virginia cried. "You're in no condition to leave!"

"Too bad," he retorted, grunting as he thrust one leg from beneath the covers. "Dammit! Where's my pants?" he growled. "I want my things." His voice was low. "Will you bring them to me if I stay in bed?"

Considering it a small concession, she nodded. "Yes, if you insist on seeing them."

"I do." Moving slowly, he shifted back to the center of the bed. "There's something else."

Virginia stiffened. "And that is?"

"I'm called Matt. And I'll call you Ginnie."

She had never cared for that particular nickname. "I prefer Virginia." Her tone held an I'm-in-charge-here edge.

His grin left her in little doubt of who actually was in charge. "I prefer Ginnie."

She shrugged. "Whatever."

"And I was shot last night, Christmas Eve, eighteen hundred and eighty-nine."

Since Virginia was not a psychiatrist, she wasn't certain how to proceed in handling his apparent delusion. In every other respect, Matt appeared stable and well balanced. Acting intuitively, she turned and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"For proof," she answered, and fetched a folded, much-read newspaper from the nurses' station.

"There," she said, slapping the paper onto the bed. "This is the special holiday edition of today's paper," she went on. "Please note the date."

Matt lowered his eyes to the paper and a shudder shook his body. The face he raised was pale. "I don't understand," he said.

"That makes two of us," Virginia replied. "The police found you lying in the middle of the street, and you are now in a hospital in Conifer, Pennsylvania."

Matt continued to stare at her as he slowly shook his head. "How did this happen, Ginnie?"

At the pleading note, Virginia raised her hands. "How can I answer you?" she cried. "I'm as much in the dark as you are! Look, why don't you start at the beginning and we'll work on it from there?" Her smile tilted. "Okay?"

His sigh echoed hers. "Okay."

His story took the better part of two hours. Virginia listened in astonishment as Matt painted a sketchy but vibrant verbal picture of life in the freewheeling West of the late nineteenth century.

So vivid was his description of that Christmas Eve, so poignant

the despair and revulsion he had felt at the necessity of killing the outlaw, that Virginia, too, shivered in the crisp night air and felt his sickness of spirit deep within her own body and soul.

What did it mean? None of it made sense. Here he was, very much alive, and yet out of sync...out of time. Virginia would have bet her reputation that Matt wasn't acting, lying or deluded.

That left... what?

Even as her mind groped for explanations, she heard again Matt's whispered words. An answer?

"Goin' begging to the Lord for a fresh start on a decent life."

Had the Lord granted alms of life to the beggar?

The rational, logical part of Virginia's brain rejected the hypothesis. Things of that nature simply didn't happen in the waning years of the twentieth century.

But couldn't they...didn't they? Earlier she had recalled instances she'd witnessed, and others she'd heard about from colleagues, of the seemingly miraculous recovery of terminally ill patients.

But time travel? She was slowly shaking her head when Matt's voice jolted her.

"Well, say something, dammit! You heard my story. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, I do."

"You said that maybe we could figure out what happened. Do you have any ideas?"

Without pausing to consider, Virginia blurted, "Do you think you were somehow transposed from then to here through some sort of time warp?"

*

"WHAT IN HELL is a time warp?"

"Well, as I understand it, there have been stories and reports of people who have been transposed from one period of time to another, both backward and forward. It's commonly called time travel. These reports are all unsubstantiated, of course."

"Do you believe that this time travel is possible?"

"No." Virginia drew a deep breath. "At least not until today."

There ensued a long period of silence, which Matt shattered with a soft, anguished cry.

"What am I gonna do, Ginnie? I can't go back over a hundred years... can I?"

"No." Answering him was difficult—worse was the image of a woman, perhaps with her children around her, that rose to torment Virginia. "Matt!" she exclaimed. "Are you...were you...married?"

"Never stayed in one place long enough," he replied. He paused,

then said slowly, "It's funny, but a wife was one of the reasons why I was going to church last night—that night," he corrected. "I had decided to quit, turn in my badge. I was thinking of a decent life... starting with a horse ranch, nothing big." His smile was weary, and sympathy welled up within her. "I was planning to ask the Boss for a second chance. Instead, I find myself in a strange place, in a strange time, with a woman who believes I'm loco."

Near tears, Virginia reached out to grasp his hand. "Matt, no, I don't believe that, truly I don't." Until then she had only a vague idea of how he must be feeling. "You're not alone, Matt. I'm here."

His eyes cleared and he smiled at her. "I appreciate that, but it's not being alone that bothers me. It's that I can't go back, and I don't know my way around your time and place." His expression was stark. "Ginnie, when I leave your hospital, I'll have nowhere to go."

While he was still speaking, Virginia thought of a solution. "You're wrong, Matt. You do have someplace to go." She was already regretting her impetuosity, but she replied in a steady voice. "You can stay at my place."

THIRTY-ODD hours had passed since Virginia had made the impulsive offer to Matt. During that period, every one of her waking hours had been crammed full with seventy minutes' worth of things to do.

Matt's reaction to her offer had been immediate and grateful—and followed at once by a demand to know when he could leave the hospital. He had seen his wound when she'd redressed it, and knew that it was well along in the healing process. Virginia had made a bargain with him: She would allow him to leave if he behaved himself for one more day. Matt gave her his word.

In retrospect, she decided that the sooner he was safely installed in her apartment, out of sight of curious eyes, the better.

Virginia had encountered the first of those eyes—and questions—as she was leaving the hospital around nine on Christmas night. Carrying the admission form, which she and Matt had reworked into a creative piece of fiction, she had run into Patrolman Jeff Klein.

"I'm on my way in to see your patient," Jeff said. "I need some information for my report."

"Sorry, Jeff. I just left his room, and he's out for the night." Virginia uttered the untruth with a silent prayer for forgiveness. "Per-

haps I can help you." She displayed the admission form. "I gather that Matthew Hawk is a drifter. He's originally from Texas...Fort Worth, and was drifting through Conifer when the accident occurred."

"Accident?" Jeff queried.

"Hmm." Virginia nodded. "Mr. Hawk insists the shooting must have been accidental—perhaps caused by a youngster fooling around with some adult's rifle."

"Possible," Jeff said thoughtfully. "Around here, more than possible. Was there any ID on him that I missed?"

"No, nothing. All we have is what he told me." Virginia plunged. "Really, Jeff, I believe you can write this one off as an accident, caused by person or persons unknown, and forget it."

"He was wearing a gun, Doctor!" Jeff exclaimed.

"Oh, come on, Jeff!" Virginia laughed. "Every other male in this community owns a gun and either wears it or carries it."

"Yeah." Jeff nodded. "Even so, I'm going to run a record check on him through Fort Worth and Washington."

Lots of luck, Virginia thought wryly. Aloud, she agreed that the precaution was wise.

Now, watching in silence as Matt examined her apartment, Virginia smiled and ran an appreciative glance over his new attire.

Armed with her credit card and the measurements she had taken from his clothing, she had done battle with shoppers eager to take advantage of the day-after-Christmas sales. The chore had been exhausting, but the results were definitely worth the effort.

The clothing she had selected for him matched the winter apparel that the majority of male residents wore: jeans, plaid flannel shirts and an outer jacket, in this case a ski parka. She had purchased socks and packages of underwear for him, as well. So Matt should have looked much the same as every other man in town.

He didn't, and the difference involved much more than mere appearance.

"It's all...all..." His voice faded.

"All a bit much to take in?"

"Yeah." Matt gave her a wry smile. "I think I might still be in shock from the ride."

Recalling his expression at his first sight of her car, Virginia laughed. "You didn't appear in the least shocked," she said. "In fact, I would have sworn you enjoyed the ride."

Matt's eyes gleamed. "I did. It sure as hell beats freezing your butt on the back of a horse." He laughed.

The apartment was spacious, equivalent in size to an average house. Virginia owned it. It contained a kitchen with a tiny dining area, the living room, three bedrooms, the smallest of which was a den, a central bath and a half bath connected to the largest bedroom. It was tastefully furnished, yet homey and comfortable.

Matt was noticeably impressed. "This is all yours?" he asked. "And you live here alone?"

"Yes." Virginia laughed. "This is my home. I own it."

Matt responded true to form. "Damn," he murmured. "The house I grew up in wasn't half this big or pretty." He returned his gaze to her. "You are one impressive lady, Doctor." Matt took a step toward her, then stopped dead, his head snapping up when the phone rang. He stood watching her as she walked to the instrument. When she lifted the receiver, Jeff Klein responded.

"Oh, hello, Jeff," she said. Matt scowled. "Have you learned anything?"

"Not much," Jeff replied. "The only information either Washington or Fort Worth could come up with on a Matthew Hawk was an

old record on a U.S. marshal by that name. But it dates back to 1889, the year he disappeared, presumed murdered in Montana by the outlaw he was after." Jeff sounded baffled. "As far as the authorities are concerned, he doesn't even exist."

"And as far as you're concerned?"

"He doesn't exist."

Virginia thanked Jeff and hung up the receiver. Then, trembling with reaction, she closed her eyes. "That was Jeff Klein, one of the patrolmen at the scene the night you were . . . found," she told him, then relayed the information Jeff had given her. When she finished, she stared at him as if he were a ghost. "It's true, Matt. You were shot in Montana in 1889, and somehow wound up here."

Matt was silent for a moment, then he started moving toward her, a slow, satisfied smile curving his lips. "I told you that you were God's answer to my prayer—didn't I?" He arched his brows over eyes gleaming with purpose.

*

THOUGH THE snowfall from a late-winter storm still covered the ground, the scent and feel of spring was in the air. The sunshine was warm, the breeze balmy.

His shoulder completely healed, Matt loped along the sidewalk, his step light in his latest acquisition. Virginia called them jogging shoes. He called them comfortable... and expensive. He had become aware of current prices the first time he had gone shopping with Virginia. Fortunately, due to the mind-boggling amount of cash Virginia had received from a collector for Matt's \$275 in gold coins—his last pay—Matt could now pay for his own purchases.

Early in the New Year Matt had begun walking, exploring the town of Conifer and its environs, after Virginia had returned to work when her ten-day holiday was over. He had learned a lot about life and history as well as about the small town in the mountains of Pennsylvania during the intervening weeks.

He had solved the mysteries of working the automatic washer and dryer, the dishwasher, the microwave and the VCR, and was learning the intricacies of the personal computer. Most days when he walked, it was with the earphones to Virginia's tiny cassette player clamped to his head—beneath the restored Stetson. He had had his long shaggy hair trimmed—not lopped off—by a stylist, no less.

The events that had occurred since 1889 astounded Matt, particularly those of the latter half of

the twentieth century. In his opinion, people, by and large, had not changed all that much. He believed as he had before that the majority of people were basically decent. But there were always the aberrants. Determined to “earn his keep,” as he termed it to Virginia, Matt had taken over the housework. He had become proficient at doing the laundry and keeping the place tidy, and was even a fair-to-middlin’ cook. He did not feel in the least demeaned by performing the chores—and Virginia was pleased with the arrangement, which was incentive enough for Matt.

The long winter of confinement within her apartment had proven their compatibility to Matt. They were both strong, determined, and basically loners, and yet they had coped. At times they had clashed, but those incidents were few in number compared to the times they had laughed together.

Turning a corner at an intersection, Matt quickened his pace. After three months, he now knew the route by heart. He was headed home. And to Matt, home meant Virginia.

Letting himself into the apartment, Matt shrugged out of his parka, then went directly to the kitchen. Even though Virginia spent little time there, it felt empty

when she wasn't there. After switching on the radio, he began gathering the ingredients needed for a casserole for dinner. He prepared the dish, slid it into the oven, then glanced around. Virginia wouldn't be home for at least another hour.

Restless, he ambled into the living room and to the wide window overlooking the foothills at the rear of the apartment complex. Scanning the snow-covered scene, Matt's gaze came to rest on the clearing in a stand of pines. A smile relieved the tightness of his lips as he studied the results of one of Virginia's few periods of relaxation.

The snowman certainly wasn't a work of art, but they had laughed a lot while building it after the storm earlier that week.

Together. The word revolving in his mind, Matt pulled on his jacket and left the apartment. Moments later he was in the clearing, scooping up snow to shore up the drooping snowman... Virginia's snowman.

Virginia and he belonged together. He knew it. His problem was in convincing her of it.

VIRGINIA PARKED her car in her designated spot at the apartment complex. It was still light! Spring

had arrived, and she hadn't noticed until that minute.

Closing her eyes, Virginia inhaled deeply. Yes, the scent of spring was in the air. It induced a heady feeling. The scent? she chided herself. Or the man waiting for her inside the building?

Matt. His name teased her senses. After a scant three months of having him at the apartment, Virginia couldn't imagine him not being there, waiting for her.

She was in love with him, of course. After a fierce inner battle, Virginia had finally admitted that reality. It scared her witless. Falling in love wasn't in her life plan. She loved her work, her independence, her freedom. She didn't want to be in love with any man.

The tantalizing aroma of simmering food enveloped her as she stepped over the threshold. Smiling in appreciation of Matt's growing culinary skill, she followed the scent to the kitchen. But Matt wasn't there.

Wondering where he could have gone, Virginia went to change into jeans and a pullover. There was still no sign of him when she left her room fifteen minutes later.

Thinking perhaps he had decided to take a short nap, she went to his room. The door was open, but his room was empty. Strangely uneasy, Virginia drifted aimlessly

from one room to another. Where was he? It wasn't like Matt to disappear this late in the afternoon—

Virginia's thoughts shattered. *Disappear*. The word echoed in her mind, the memory of one of the time travel novels she and Matt had read. In the story, the heroine, from another time period, had in the end suddenly disappeared.

It was fiction, Virginia reminded herself, clasping her arms around her trembling body. But what if...? She loved him, and if he was gone, lost to her, he would never know.

"Matt." Virginia was unaware of calling his name aloud. Frantic, frightened, she turned away, and wandered into the living room. The delicious aroma of the meal he had prepared wafted to her once more from the kitchen. Tears filled her eyes, blurring her vision, as she walked to the window. Remembering their snowman, she looked out at the clearing.

"Matt!" This time his name exploded from her throat. As real as life and twice as beautiful, Matt was in the clearing, shoring up their melting snowman.

Virginia was absolutely still for an instant, devouring the sight of him. Grabbing her ski parka, she pulled it on as she dashed from the apartment.

"Matt," Virginia called to him as she raced from the complex to the clearing. He turned and waved.

"Hi," he responded. "You're early, aren't you?"

"Yes," she replied. "I couldn't find you. I was afraid you were... gone," she whispered.

Matt frowned. "Gone? Gone where?"

"Back." Virginia sniffed. "Hold me," she pleaded. "Please hold me. Oh, Matt, I was so scared."

Matt's arms tightened, crushing her soft body against the hard strength of his own. "Ginnie, were you afraid I'd gone back in time again?"

"Yes." Virginia muffled a sob in his jacket.

Neither of them knew how long they stood there, clinging to each other like lost and frightened children.

"You're cold," he said finally, drawing back to look at her. "Matter of fact, so am I. What are we standing out here for, when it's warm inside?"

Virginia returned his smile. "It smells good inside, too."

"Oh, hell!" Matt exclaimed. "I forgot all about the casserole in the oven."

The meal was not ruined. But then, it wouldn't have mattered much if it had been. Though they picked at the food, neither of them

really tasted it. Their gazes were locked, and in the depths of their eyes burned the desire to appease a far greater hunger. Matt pushed his plate away and stood up, holding out his hand to her. Virginia rose and in silent agreement, they walked to her bedroom.

Murmuring of his need for her, Matt drew her into his arms. Answering his plea, Virginia offered her mouth and herself to him.

His kiss began with slow reverence but swiftly escalated to a hard, driving demand. She returned his kiss with an eagerness born of awakening passion. His hands skimmed over her until they found and claimed her breasts.

"Ginnie, Ginnie." Matt's voice was rough with desire. The trembling hands that removed her clothes were gentle. "You are so very beautiful," he whispered.

"And you are incredibly handsome," Virginia whispered back, staring with unabashed admiration at the magnificence of his naked masculinity.

She went into his arms as if it was the most natural thing in the world. They sank to the bed as one. Murmuring delicious enticements, Matt set Virginia on fire with his hands and lips and tongue. Glowing like a flame, burning only for him, she drove him on by exploring his muscled, hard body.

When he could endure no more of the sweet torture, Matt slid between the silken lure of her trembling thighs. Her soft, strong hands grasped his taut hips. Moving slowly, savoring the moment, he entered her. He frowned when he met with resistance and, arching, he thrust forward, then froze when Virginia went stiff and cried out in pain.

"Ginnie?" Matt's voice betrayed his utter astonishment. "You're a virgin?"

Virginia drew a slow breath before answering. "Yes. Is that a sin?" A hint of laughter tinged her voice as she smoothed her palm over the muscles contracting in his buttocks. "I'm a physician, Matt—remember? I knew what to expect." She pressed against him with her hands, drawing him deeper within her. "The pain is gone now, and the tension is easing."

Matt could feel the truth of her words as passion flared anew, and again he began to move with gentle thrusts.

"Yes, yes!" Virginia cried, sinking her nails into his flesh as she arched to meet his advance. "Love me, Matt. Show me how very real you are!"

"I'm real, love," he said in a voice tight with strain. "You'll see." Bending to her, he pressed his

open mouth to hers and matched the measured thrusts of his tongue to the increasing rhythm of his body.

Virginia felt drenched in sensation. Her body was on fire, every nerve ending burning, screaming for release from the sensual tension. She had never dreamed it could be like this... that anything could feel like this. She cried out in wonder when the tension snapped, flinging her into the depths of the shudders that were cascading through her body.

A moment later she heard Matt's muffled cry of satisfaction and felt the rippling tremors that shook his long, muscular form. Locked together, they rode the storm wave to the tranquil shore.

"Oh, Ginnie!" Matt groaned as he levered himself onto the mattress beside her. "I've never experienced anything like that in my life." He drew several deep breaths. "That was wonderful. You're wonderful." Reaching for her, he gathered her into his arms, close to his flushed body. "I'm sorry for hurting you," he murmured, kissing her with tender concern.

"Don't be," she whispered, teasing his lower lip with the tip of her tongue. "After the initial shock, I loved every tension-filled minute of it."

Matt's roar of joyous laughter danced in the dark room. "I was wrong," he said. "You aren't wonderful, you're damned fantastic."

"I might say the same about you," Virginia replied. "But I don't want to risk inflating your male ego."

"My ego?" Matt loomed over her. "What would you say if I told you that you were in real danger of inflating something else?"

"So soon?" Virginia stared at him. "I mean really?"

"Really," he repeated. "I wasn't merely hungry for you, Ginnie. I was starved."

"Has it been such a long, dry spell for you?" she asked, innocently falling into his trap.

"Over a hundred years."

*

"WHEN DID YOU first realize that you were falling in love with me?" Coming from Matt, the age-old lover's question sounded brand-new.

They were seated at the kitchen table. After Matt had finished in the bathroom, Virginia had showered, then stripped and remade the bed, while he cleared away the dinner remnants and cooked scrambled eggs and bacon.

"Oh, not long after I brought you here from the hospital, I guess," she replied on a sigh.

"That long?" Matt gaped at her. "Dammit, Ginnie, I've been going crazy for three months, trying to think of a way to make you love me! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I didn't want to be in love with you," she answered honestly.

"Because of who I am? The time I come from?"

"No, of course not," Virginia said. "I didn't want to fall in love with any man."

"But...why?" Matt looked baffled.

"I keep a tight schedule. I never had the time or desire to rearrange my life to suit a man."

"You've kept to your schedule ever since I've been here," he pointed out. "And I don't expect things to change all that much now...except that we'll be sleeping together."

"We will?" Virginia arched her brows.

"You know we will." Matt smiled. "And don't try to change the subject."

"What was the subject?"

"You, and the reason you were still a virgin."

"I don't know what the big deal is about my being a virgin!"

"It's about you," he said. "And your fear of men."

Virginia stared at him. "I'm not afraid of men. It's simply that ever since I was old enough to notice such things, I've seen what usually happens to women when they make the mistake of falling in love."

Matt frowned. "What happens?"

She shrugged. "Because his own self-image is fragile, he bolsters his ego by undermining hers. You know—Mr. Machismo and his mate. I decided before I was fifteen that I would never allow that to happen to me. I knew what I wanted to do, what I wanted to be. And I was determined that no man would ever play out his fantasy of lord and master over me."

Matt looked pensive for a moment, then grinned and said, "Lord and master, huh? The idea has appeal. But I can't see you knuckling under to any mere male." His smile became a grin. "Hell, if I thought it might work, I'd give it a shot myself."

Virginia's smile was wry. "It wouldn't work."

"Well, isn't that what I just said?"

She nodded.

"You know, the first time I got a clear look at you, when you walked into my room Christmas

afternoon, I kinda got the idea that you were . . . well, sorta like a lady of the line."

They were back in bed. Matt was propped against the headboard, one hand wrapped around a steaming cup of coffee, the other wrapped around Virginia.

"A what?"

Matt shrugged. "Well . . . something like a loose woman."

"*Something* like a loose woman?"

Matt grinned. "Okay, more like a prostitute."

"A pros—Matthew Hawk!" Virginia exclaimed. "Whatever made you think a thing like that? I . . . I . . ."

"Calm down, honey." Matt silenced her with a kiss.

"A lady of the line, indeed. What an expression. I love it!"

"Well, it doesn't fit you, anyway," Matt said. "But that day, you were wearing paint on your face, and your legs were exposed, and I'd never seen heels that high on a lady's shoes."

"Paint? Legs? Heels? Oh, Matt, that's a riot!"

"You gotta remember, I didn't know where I was."

"And then I said you could stay at my place!" she gasped around her laughter. "You must have really believed you'd died and gone

to heaven! No wonder you were so shocked that I was still a virgin."

Matt's expression changed. "Are you hurting, Ginnie? I mean, was it too much?"

"I'm fine . . . a little tender, that's all. The patient will live."

"Good," Matt muttered. "I'm glad."

THAT NIGHT set the precedent for the following weeks. Their days continued as they had before, with Virginia working and Matt reading and walking. But their nights had changed. Instead of sitting in front of the TV or with their noses buried in their respective books, they spent the majority of their time in bed, her bed, making love and conversation—not necessarily at the same time.

The very next night conversation came first and concerned protection . . . Virginia's.

"Of course, I'm willing to go on the pill, but I can't start taking it until next month," she said, after explaining the methods of birth control that were available. "So, until then . . ." She dropped a foil-wrapped packet into his hand. "You don't mind?"

"No," Matt replied. "But then again, I wouldn't mind seeing my baby growing inside of you, either."

Melting, Virginia threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Matt, I love you so much, and I'd love to feel your baby growing inside of me!"

The packet was tossed into the drawer, and the prescription for the pill remained in Virginia's purse. As was soon evident, it was already too late for either.

"I'VE TOLD YOU most of my life story," Matt said one night. "But you haven't said much about yourself."

Virginia almost never spoke about her past. But, snuggled against his warm body, replete and relaxed from his special brand of lovemaking, she was amenable.

"There's not much to tell," she said. "I was born and raised right here in Conifer, went to a university in Philadelphia, then came back here to finish my internship."

"Family?" Matt nudged.

"My parents endured a long, unhappy marriage. She was repressed. He was bored," she said. "They divorced a couple of years ago and have since both remarried."

Matt shifted to his side to look at her. "Our marriage won't be like that, honey."

She arched her brows. "We're getting married?"

His eyes held hers. "Aren't we?"

"Yes."

"Yes," he echoed softly. "That is, if we can. I have no identification of any kind. How—" he began.

Virginia interrupted him. "There are ways," she assured him. "I met all types of people while I was doing my residency. I remember one man had identification in three different names. He told me that if I ever needed anything, I shouldn't hesitate to call him." Her smile turned rueful. "Oh, yes, there are ways... None of them legal, but..." Her voice trailed away.

"But we'll do what we have to do," Matt finished.

And they did. A week and a half later, Matt had all the identification he required, and all in his own name.

AFTER A COLD SNAP, spring arrived in full force. The sunshine was bright and warm. Flowers burst into bloom...and so did Virginia. In late April she visited the hospital's staff obstetrician, who confirmed her self-diagnosis.

Virginia held her news close to her heart until later that night.

"Matt?"

"Mmm?" Yawning, he pulled her into his arms.

"Do you remember that discussion we had about birth control?"

"Uh-huh." He yawned again. "Why?"

"Do you remember what you said at the time?"

Matt was thoughtful. "Yeah. I said that I didn't mind using something, but that I also wouldn't mind seeing you grow—" He stopped abruptly. "Ginnie, are you trying to tell me that you're pregnant?"

Virginia's smile was tremulous. "Yes."

His arms tightened, crushing her to him. "Honey, that's wonderful!" He kissed her hard. "Isn't it?"

Virginia laughed and cried at the same time. "Yes, Matt, I think it is wonderful."

"We've got to get married," he said. "The sooner the better."

"Tonight?" Virginia teased.

"No," he answered. "I've got other plans for tonight."

"Really? Like what?" she asked.

"Like the future," Matt replied. "I've been thinking about how I'm going to support my—" he grinned "—growing family."

Virginia refrained from pointing out to him that she earned an excellent income and had a tidy sum saved. She knew better. Matt

was a proud man. "Have you decided on something?"

"Yes. But first of all, I'll need some money."

"Okay," she agreed. "I have some savings. How much do you think you'll need?"

He looked astonished. "I don't want your money."

"But you just said you needed some," she reminded him. "Why won't you take mine?"

"Because I have my own."

"Your own money?" Virginia frowned. "I don't understand. I thought all you had were those gold coins."

"All I had on me at the time I was shot," Matt agreed. "But I have more. I was always paid in gold, and I always set some aside."

Virginia smiled. She remembered him telling her that the coins in his belt were his pay. Assuming he was paid monthly, Matt had earned \$275 a month. How much could he have set aside? "Were you saving for anything in particular?"

"A place of my own someday in the future, after I was past it." His voice took on a dry drawl. "Of course, I never dreamed it would be this far into the future." His fingers flexed gently into her ribs. "A small spread...a place to raise horses...and babies," he added

softly, sliding his hand to her still flat tummy.

"Thank you," she whispered. "How much had you saved?" she asked.

"The last time I checked, a little over three thousand dollars."

Virginia jolted back. "In the same kind of gold coins?"

"Exactly the same." Matt smiled.

"If you could sell them for the same amount that you got for those other coins, you could see a return of... a bundle!"

His smile grew into a wicked grin. "Yeah, honey, that's the way I figured it."

"Matt, that's wonderful for you. But... it's been over a hundred years. You don't know if your account is still on record, or even if the bank still exists."

"Bank?" Matt snorted. "I never trusted it to a bank."

"Then where *did* you keep it?"

"Don't worry, honey," he soothed. "It's safe."

Virginia sighed. "Where, Matt?"

"I stashed it in a well on that scraggly piece of land that came to me when my mother died."

"Oh, Matt." Virginia's shoulders drooped. "You keep forgetting that it's been over a hundred years."

"I haven't forgotten anything, honey," he murmured. "Don't worry, the money's safe."

"Unless someone built a high rise on top of it," she said morosely. "Or a whole town."

MATT WAS amazed by the hustle and bustle of Dallas-Fort Worth airport, and stunned by his first close look at a city. Seated beside Virginia in the rental car, he goggled from side to side as she drove the beltway around Dallas, before heading for Fort Worth.

Despite the obvious changes, Matt recognized Fort Worth, if only because the famous stockyards were still there.

"It must all seem rather strange to you now," Virginia murmured, indicating the shops lining the street.

"Yeah, it looks a lot different from my old stomping grounds." He nodded, then he grinned at her. "It's a whole lot cleaner, too." With a final glance around, he grasped her hand. "I've seen enough," he said. "Let's go get my money."

Finding the small ranch proved easier than Virginia had feared. After he studied a detailed map he'd purchased, Matt pinpointed the section, located some distance southwest of Dallas.

"You just drive nice and slow along here for a mile or so," Matt said, narrowly studying the terrain. "I'll tell you when to stop."

When he gave the word, Virginia braked the car, then sat staring at the barren bleakness of the landscape. This scrap of nothing was his heritage?

"It's a real mess, isn't it?" Matt observed. "And that mess killed my parents." Sighing, he pushed open the car door. "The sight of it churns my gut. Let's find my money and get out of here."

Virginia had to step lively to keep up with Matt's determined stride. At a near trot, she followed him.

"Eu-re-ka! What'd I tell ya, honey?" he yelled. "Hurry over here and look. The well's still here."

And there it was. Panting, Virginia stared at its round, foot-wide stone wall. Parts of the wall were crumbling, but it was still there. Fascinated, she watched as Matt moved unerringly to a spot in the wall and worked one large rock, jiggling it back and forth until he could pull it free.

"Now pray," Matt said.

Excitement and hope making her feel slightly sick, Virginia kept her gaze riveted to the wall. She gasped aloud when Matt withdrew his hand. His fingers were wrapped

around a bulging, soft buckskin pouch. He repeated the process three times; by the time he had examined each pouch, she felt exhausted.

"It's all here," he informed her. "Just as I left it."

"Now you can have that place you wanted," Virginia said, blinking against a surge of hot tears.

"Yes." Walking to her, Matt drew her into his arms. "Now I can raise horses . . . and babies."

Virginia went absolutely still, for in that instant the moment of truth, her moment of truth was upon her. And in that instant, Virginia intuitively knew that this man was perhaps the only one she could ever make a commitment with. She was head over heels in love with him, but in addition to that she felt instinctively that they were soul mates, destined to be together. Matthew Hawk had traveled through time and space to be with her. She was as exclusively his as he was obviously hers.

Virginia was almost afraid to ask the only question left in her mind, but she had to know. "Where? I mean, did you have any place special in mind?"

"Well, I had kinda taken a fancy to the foothills near the Anaconda Mountains of Montana."

Virginia's spirits nose-dived. But he wasn't finished. Lifting her chin with one finger, Matt smiled.

"But foothills are foothills," he murmured. "And the foothills surrounding Conifer, Pennsylvania suit me just fine. How about you?"

Tears of happiness rolling down her cheeks, Virginia whispered, "They suit me just fine, too."

"Good." Matt kissed her tear-wet eyes, her damp cheeks and trembling lips. "Let's go home."

VIRGINIA AND Matt were married the Saturday after they returned to Conifer from Texas. With no fuss, no fanfare, but a wealth of love, they exchanged their vows in a civil ceremony. Holed up in Virginia's bedroom they had a one-day honeymoon, and then she went back to work.

Matt's gold coins were sold before spring gave way to summer, portioned out to a dozen eager and rich collectors. His profit was, as Virginia had aptly predicted, "A bundle."

They spent almost all of Virginia's free time driving around the foothills, looking at property for sale. Most of the prospects were either too large or too run-down. But late in August, they made a Sunday appointment to look at a small farm. The location was per-

fect for Virginia, only fifteen minutes from her office and the hospital. Set in a valley nestled at the base of the foothills, the farm was a beautiful piece of real estate.

Virginia fell in love with it at once.

"It'll need some fixing up," Matt said laconically.

"Well, if you'd rather not bother..."

Laughing, Matt swept her into his arms. "It's ours, and you know it. I'll have it ready by the time the baby comes."

VIRGINIA HAD never believed it was possible to be so happy. She had an ardent, caring husband. She was healthy and enjoying her pregnancy. She was working, and since the baby wasn't due until after Christmas, she planned to keep working until Thanksgiving. She was content.

After Thanksgiving, Virginia went on maternity leave... and on a shopping spree. While Matt worked around the house, she shopped for things to make it feel like a home.

It was during one such shopping expedition, this one for Christmas presents for Matt, that Virginia stopped by a used bookstore on her way back to the apartment. Throughout the eleven

months since Matt had appeared, Virginia had continued to search for books on the subject of time travel.

Now she examined several paperback books before noticing a slim hardcover volume stuck between two hefty tomes. The title—*Here and Gone*—was scripted in faded gilt on the spine. Intrigued, she saw that the book was a compilation of ten separate accounts of travel through time. Excitement curling through her, Virginia paid for the book, then rushed home to read it.

Several hours later, when she closed the book, her happiness was shattered and her contentment gone. Though she tried to reject the conclusions drawn by the journalist who had compiled the accounts, uncertainty had been instilled into her mind.

Though each of the ten instances covered in the book had taken place at different times and in a variety of places, there were similarities in every one of them. Further, the author maintained that in every instance, the person involved disappeared again—exactly one year later.

Matt came home late in the afternoon to find Virginia sitting on the sofa, pale and trembling.

"Ginnie?" Matt stared into her frightened eyes. "Honey, what's

wrong? Is it the baby? Are you in pain?"

"No, no." Virginia shook her head. "I'm...it's this book, Matt." She thrust it into his hands. "Read it, Matt. Then, please tell me that it's not true."

"A book?" Matt frowned. "Honey, what is this?"

"Just read it, Matt, and then we'll talk."

But they didn't talk after he had finished reading. They denied, derided and rationalized, but didn't really talk.

By mutual agreement, Virginia and Matt decided not to move into their new home until after the baby was born. The reason they gave each other was the closeness of her apartment to the hospital. But they both knew the real reason.

IT BEGAN snowing around dawn the day before Christmas. Virginia went into labor late in the afternoon. The apparent coincidence in the time frame terrified her, though Matt was by her side every minute. Only his eyes betrayed the fear he refused to give voice to.

At 10:25 p.m. their daughter arrived, squalling loudly against the indignity of it all. Exhausted, Virginia clung to Matt's hand.

"I love you so much," she whispered. "Please, don't leave me."

"I won't." Matt's voice was hoarse from strain. "You know I could never leave you. You're my life."

Virginia was half-asleep when she heard him begin to murmur. "I love you, Ginnie. Thank you for my daughter. She's beautiful, like her mother. Take care of her for me, if I..."

Matt's voice trailed away. Virginia was asleep.

He walked beside the litter that transported Virginia to her room, saw her settled into bed, then turned and walked to the visitors' lounge.

The room was empty. He was tired, and he was scared. Dropping into a chair by the window, he folded his arms on the wide windowsill and stared at the shimmering snowflakes dancing in the air. Then leaning forward, Matt rested his head upon his folded arms and closed his eyes. It was Christmas Eve, almost Christmas morning. Within one short year, everything he had wanted had come to him. He had a decent life. He had a beautiful new daughter. He had Virginia's love. Had he found it all, only to lose it again? Praying for Virginia, for their child and for himself, Matt fell asleep.

He awakened to the sound of church bells celebrating the arrival of Christmas. They sounded exactly like the ones he'd heard ringing from the crest of a hill in Montana. For an instant Matt was afraid to open his eyes. He flexed his fingers. He was in the hospital's visitors' lounge. The year was up. He was alive. He was no longer a stranger.

Virginia.

Springing from the chair, Matt strode along the quiet hospital corridor to her room. He entered cautiously, so as not to disturb her. She was awake, and she was crying.

"Ginnie!" Crossing the room at a run, Matt sat down on the edge of the bed and lifted her into his arms.

"Matt! Oh, Matt!" Clinging to him, she sobbed against his chest. "I was so frightened. I thought you were gone...that you had disappeared, gone back."

"I know." Tears trailing down his cheeks, Matt held her close and murmured a silent prayer of thanks. "But I'm here, and I'm going to stay. Merry Christmas, honey. I'm home."





**BETHANY
CAMPBELL**
**A Thousand
Roses**



All Ben wanted was a little peace. But feisty, troublesome Perdy Nordstrand just wouldn't leave him alone to face his Christmas ghosts.



Perdita sat cross-legged on the gold carpet of her unsold house in New Hampshire. Unsold and empty, she reminded herself—while most of her furniture was on a moving van headed for Cloverdale, Indiana. And if the house wasn't sold, she couldn't buy her fabric shop in Cloverdale, so there wasn't any reason for her furniture to be going there.

She thought briefly of walking down to the pond, hacking a hole in the ice big enough to fit her body through, and...

"I'm sorry, Perdita," Sam Puckett said, "but there's a cloud on the title of the house, and Squires won't buy till it's cleared up."

"A cloud on the title?" Perdy ran her fingers through her short dark hair, frowning.

Sam undid the straps of his battered Puckett Real Estate briefcase, then took out a blue and white surveyor's map and spread it on the carpet in front of her.

"See this little corner of the property that's shaded in? It's called a gore area." He tapped the small pie-shaped area with his silver pen. "There was a small error when the property was sold thirty

years ago. But the property's been sold six times since then, and nobody's ever questioned it. Until that hotshot Boston lawyer came around—him and that Toynbee's Department Store big shot, Squires."

Perdy stared at the map. "I'm going to lose my shop in Cloverdale then."

Sam's mustache began to make a timorous-mouse movement. "Maybe that would be for the best," he began, and Perdy groaned inwardly, knowing the lecture was coming again. "Why do you want to go to a town you don't even know? Buy a fabric shop you've never even seen?"

She wanted to say: *I haven't got anyplace else to go.* She'd been through Cloverdale once when she was sixteen years old, and she had fallen in love with the place on sight. It felt like a hometown. It was the kind of place she had always imagined.

Sometimes, when she was registering at yet another new school and had to fill in her birthplace on the entrance forms, she had been tempted to write in Cloverdale, Indiana. Sometimes she'd scribbled the words in the margin of her

notebook. In her heart, it was home. But now she was going to lose it.

Persnickety old Ebenezer Squires and his equally persnickety lawyer had ruined everything. Ebenezer Scrooge, she corrected herself. Christmas was next week, and she'd had that same premonitory quiver of nervousness when she'd heard that her buyer had that horrid, creaking name Ebenezer.

Sam was grumbling, his teeth clenched. "Maybe I can get you a better buyer than these...these villains. You'll see, dear. That lawyer and his stupid rent-prior-to-purchase agreement are a sheer nuisance."

Oh, no, Perdy thought, letting the word *rent* sink into her brain. "He can't hold me to that, can he?"

Sam stuck out his rather unsubstantial chin and stood up. "Those people are crazy, Perdita. We're better off without them. Trust me."

She had little choice, she thought gloomily as she stood up to see Sam to the door. At five-foot-nine, she found herself at eye level with the top of Sam's cap.

"Stand up straight, darling," Esmeralda had always told her. "Stand proud."

Dear Esmeralda, thought Perdy. Who better could have argued the case for height? Esmeralda had

been tiny, a midget in fact, and she had been like a mother to Perdy. It had been Esmeralda who had willed her this pretty house in the New Hampshire woods, something secure for "my tall girl," as she'd liked to call Perdy. Something solid.

Oh, Esmeralda, Perdy thought, *I miss you*. She felt tears threaten, but she held them back and watched Sam fumble his way into a pair of mittens that resembled bear paws. She closed the door behind him.

She looked around the bare living room. Only Esmeralda's old armchair was left. Tomorrow the Salvation Army truck was coming to pick it up, along with a few other pieces. She'd have to phone them and cancel.

Esmeralda would hate her for crying. Her ghost would probably come back and rattle chains all over the place. She had been a strong one. "When things get tough," she always told Perdy, "you just get tougher. What would your father think if he saw you crying? You'd break his heart."

Perdy had loved her father dearly, and hurting him was something she would never have done.

Perdy stared out the bay window at Miracle Mountain. She would not cry. She'd try to think.

She was a slender young woman—not beautiful, but strik-

ing. Esmeralda had taught her how to make the most of herself: how to make up her dark eyes, how to wear her unruly dark hair short and sleek on the sides, with curly bangs in front. And, of course, the million admonitions to stand tall. "All the way up, Perdy—and hold that pretty head high."

"I'm scared," she had once admitted to Esmeralda, when she had resisted starting another new school.

"Honey," Esmeralda had consoled her, "most people are scared a lot of the time. The trick is never to act scared."

Perdy took Esmeralda's advice. She stood tall and developed a crooked little smile that was both cynical and provocative, and a talent for fast comebacks. People thought twice before they said anything cruel.

Perdy's father, Nels Nordstrand, had been a professional wrestler on the Midwestern circuit. So had Esmeralda's husband, Frankie, once, when midget wrestlers were an American craze; but the craze and Frankie's back gave out about the same time. He became Nels's manager.

Perdy's father was the Norwegian Monster: the Ugliest Man in the World.

Once he had been a stunningly handsome young man. In the rowdy world of wrestling, he had

been one of the good guys: lean, clean, muscular and as handsome as a young Norse god.

A car accident had wiped all that out in a few fiery moments. Perdy's mother, a quiet, dark-haired woman whom Perdy remembered vaguely as always humming and smelling like cinnamon, was killed instantly. Her father, when he finally was able to leave the hospital, was grossly scarred.

Frankie and Esmeralda, like tiny fairy godparents, had taken them in. The four of them bought a big trailer, and they followed the gaudy wrestling circuit through the Midwest, living like Gypsies.

Perdy, always "the new kid in town," had been teased unmercifully—about her father, about tiny Frankie and Esmeralda, about the big old rusting trailer. Adolescence had been one long hell, but Esmeralda had kept Perdy going.

"We may not be the average all-American family, but we love you. Don't you worry what people think—it's what's inside a person that counts."

Perdy knew it was true. When she was eighteen and had just finished high school, Frankie died. Esmeralda gave Frankie the biggest funeral she could afford. Her chin quivered, but she didn't cry.

"Esmeralda, what you gonna do now?" Nels had finally asked in his slow way. He had taken so

much physical punishment in the ring that his reflexes were slowing and his speech was slurred.

"Well," said Esmeralda, "I guess maybe I'll go home, kids. I'd like to see a couple more New Hampshire autumns before I clock out."

But what about us? Perdy had wanted to cry out.

Esmeralda, as usual, had seemed to read Perdy's mind. "You get yourself to college. Here," Esmeralda said, reaching out for her purse and opening it. "This will get you started." She handed Perdy a check for two thousand dollars. "Frankie meant some of the life insurance money for you. We both knew our tall girl was going to need some college money some day. So here's a start."

About a year after Esmeralda left, Nels became seriously ill. That had been two years ago. Perdy was in the middle of her second year of fashion design when her father's lingering lung illness required them to go on a quixotic tour of the Southwest to search for drier, more breathable air.

They traded the trailer for a van, and Perdy worked a dozen different jobs in a dozen different cities: in the alterations department of a department store, as a waitress, a file clerk, even as a costume mistress in a small seedy nightclub in Las Vegas.

It was in Elko, Nevada, that Nels finally collapsed. Two weeks later he died. Perdy was in a daze of grief.

Three months after his death, Perdy learned that Esmeralda had died almost within a week of Nels.

She had tried to call Esmeralda after her father's death, but her phone always rang and rang, ominously unanswered.

Perdy had been working as a costume mistress in Las Vegas when she received a letter from Esmeralda's lawyer. It had been forwarded three times. It was a professionally cool letter informing Perdy that Esmeralda had left her her house, furnishings, jewelry and small bank balance.

Perdy felt vaguely traitorous for selling Esmeralda's house, but Cloverdale had been her imaginary haven for so long that it seemed only logical to go there now. The desire had become an obsession with her lately, one that kept her from going mad with grief. Cloverdale seemed like the magical answer to everything. But now it had been jerked from her grasp at the last minute by the big wheel from Boston and his demanding lawyer.

The phone rang.

Who on earth...? She knew nobody in New Hampshire except Sam Puckett, and he had just left.

She picked up the receiver as if it were a poisonous snake.

"Yes?" she said hesitantly.

"Miss Perdita Nordstrand?" a harsh gravelly voice asked.

"Speaking."

"This is Arnold Algernon, Miss Nordstrand. I am Mr. Squires's attorney. Are you prepared to vacate your house so that Mr. Squires may rent it, as agreed upon and signed?"

Perdy drew in her breath, feeling dizzy. "I can't rent my house. I haven't got anyplace to go!" she replied in disbelief.

"We must talk. We shall be there in twenty minutes. Good day."

The line went dead.

She could almost hear Esmeralda's throaty little voice: "Stand up to the suckers with all the moxie you've got, kiddo."

She stamped upstairs to her nearly empty bedroom and rummaged through the closet. She donned her most outrageous outfit: a pair of bright-crimson silky lounging pajamas. The top had a plunging neckline and was printed all over with black silhouettes of little pitchfork-wielding devils. She put on gold high-heeled sandals and wound Esmeralda's favorite bracelet—a golden mesh snake with jeweled red eyes—around her wrist. Then she marched to the bathroom and added a little more

makeup. She'd been using more and more makeup since Nels had died, like a sort of mask to protect her from the world.

She went back down the stairs and sat in the gold chair to wait. The fast-falling twilight had almost veiled Miracle Mountain.

When the doorbell rang she flipped on the hall light and pranced through the entryway to the front door, standing tall, as Esmeralda would have wanted. Her high heels made her an even six feet, and she flung open the door, knowing that she would be staring down at Arnold Algernon.

She was right.

Arnold Algernon fixed his eyes on Perdy's cleavage, which was at exactly eye level.

"I have one thing to say to you," she flung out haughtily. "If Ebenezer Squires isn't going to buy my house, he is certainly not going to rent it. If he tries to move in, I'm afraid he'll find himself living with me. Because I am not moving out."

"I think I might like it just fine," said another voice. It was a velvety gravel, and cold as the night. "And if I ever hear you call me Ebenezer again, I'll strangle you. The name is Ben Squires."

In spite of her high heels, she found herself looking up at the man standing behind Algernon. He was very tall, at least six foot

three. Perdy's first thought was that this man was stronger than she was. The idea struck her like a blow, and it frightened her.

But she kept standing tall, the way she had always been taught.

Ben Squires just stood there, his dark eyes studying her as coldly as she studied him, as easy and arrogant as if this were already his house. His face was too lean, too severe; his cheekbones were too high, his nose too long for true handsomeness.

He looked every inch the proper Bostonian. Except, Perdy thought, her mind racing, except for that face. The deep grooves on either side of his lean mouth hadn't been formed by smiling. And the way his lips were clamped tight, as if he were holding back some ferocious inner turbulence, was disturbing. His eyes, under dark brows as straight as arrows, were just as disturbing. They were not simply brown, like Perdy's. They were black, and they seemed to say very directly, "I know who I am and what I want. And what I want, I get. Always."

This man, this Ben Squires, standing there carefully slapping his black gloves against his open palm, had more will than she'd ever seen before, and it scared her. She was going to have to reach deep down inside herself in order to stand up to him. He had a sneer

fit for a king. She glanced first at Algernon, then at him.

Ben Squires put his hands into the pockets of his jacket. "Algie, give me the papers. I think you'd better wait in the car."

Algernon turned to face him. "Ben, this woman will not listen to reason. She—"

Squires's black eyes drilled implacably into the lawyer's. "Algie—the car," he said curtly.

Algernon stood for a moment. Then he handed Squires the papers, picked up his briefcase and left, as obediently as a well-trained dog.

Oh dear, Perdy thought. She didn't like the scene now at all. Algernon's presence had provided a buffer between her and her real opponent.

Light gleamed on his high cheekbones, lost itself in the blackness of his eyes as he came into the house.

"Do you always lounge around like a barbarian princess?"

Perdy suddenly felt too flamboyant, possibly even gaudy. But she didn't allow her gaze to falter. She crossed her arms over her chest and said, "Say whatever you have to say and then join your friend."

"Do you want to read these papers, Miss Nordstrand?" He held them toward her mockingly. "I want this house. I want to be in this house by Christmas."

"You still want to buy the house?" she asked cautiously.

"All you have to do is get the cloud off the title."

"Sam says the gore area is no problem at all."

Ben Squires studied her carefully.

"The gore area is a problem, Miss Nordstrand. Your realtor and your bank should have noticed. And you should have, too, when you bought the house."

"I didn't buy it," she defended herself. "I inherited it."

"Then whoever left it to you should have had more sense," he snapped.

Perdy bridled. Insulting her was one thing, but insulting Esmeralda was another. "Keep my benefactor out of this; you—you Harvard hotshot."

"Yale, not Harvard." His voice was calm and mocking, and his light scorn cut like a razor.

They glowered at each other until Squires finally shook his head in distraction and ran his fingers through the expertly barbered dark hair that fell across his forehead. He sighed, a sound of both weariness and contempt.

"Where's your furniture?"

"My furniture, thanks to you, is on its way to Indiana," she said. "I'll probably have to pay to have it shipped back here. Once again—thanks to you."

"You sent your furniture before the house was actually sold?"

Piqued, she crossed her arms tightly. He looked at her and shook his head.

"Look," he said at last, turning to stare out the window into the darkness that now cloaked Miracle Mountain, "do you want to sell this place or not?"

"Of course I want to sell it."

"And I want to buy it."

He turned to face her, and again the cold black of his eyes under those severe brows gave her a jolt. It was rather disconcerting to have to stare so far up at a man.

"Let me get this straight," she demanded, cocking her head to one side. "I'm supposed to rent my house to you until the sale is final."

"Very good," he said slowly and sarcastically.

"But if I can't clear up the business about the gore area, you won't buy the house. But you'd still be living in it."

"Correct again. Your perspicacity overwhelms."

"Well," Perdy retorted, putting her hands back on her hips, "where am I supposed to live? If I don't sell this house, I won't have any money!"

"You look as if you're very well taken care of," he said, teeth clenched. "Besides, I'll be paying you rent."

"No, you will not," she replied hotly. "Because you're not moving in here." She jabbed his chest with her finger for emphasis.

He seized her wrist in a viselike clamp, and she blinked in surprise. She didn't like having him so near. She didn't like the cold black fire in his eyes. She didn't like the intimidating width of his shoulders.

"I am moving in, Miss Nordstrand."

"I'm not moving out, Mr. Squires!" she hissed back, her brown eyes locking with his black ones.

He was breathing hard and so was she. The air between them throbbed with something far more primal than a disagreement about a house.

But just when she thought he might put his hands around her throat, he surprised her completely.

He smiled—really smiled—for the first time.

"So be it, Miss Nordstrand. I think you'll be a most interesting housemate."

Before Perdy could think of a retort, he gave her a long, measuring, head-to-toe look. "Sam Puckett says you're going out to Indiana to buy a business. Seeing the mess you've managed to get yourself into here—" his eyes rested with cool amusement on the

shadowy cleavage revealed by her blouse "—you'll probably lose your pretty red shirt—devils and all."

He cocked an eyebrow and moved to the door. He paused in the small foyer as he opened the door, gazing with disdain at the wreath of pine boughs Perdy had made and tied up with a great bow of crimson velvet.

"That thing," he said with obvious distaste, "has got to go." He shook his head in revulsion.

"Scrooge!" Perdy cried after him. But he had already stepped out into the night, pulling the door shut behind him.

THE NEXT morning Perdy trudged out to get the mail. She opened an official-looking envelope from the village clerk. She read the notice and groaned. Her state property tax was due—the amount made her wince in pain. She hadn't counted on having to pay it. It was to have been deducted from the final sale agreement. Now it was due. Her head throbbed like a drum.

She opened the other envelope. It was a Christmas card from "All the People Eager to Serve You at Puckett Realty." On the front it said, "Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men."

How ironic, thought Perdy as she stood looking out the bay window. It really was Christmas-

time—and her whole life was coming apart at the seams. All because of a tall, dark, cynical stranger who found her situation merely laughable.

She had exactly enough money in her bank account to pay about three-quarters of what she owed. She couldn't afford to rent a place if she wanted to.

"Joy to the world," she muttered darkly, watching the snow fall.

Ben Squires had her back against the wall. He was trying to force her out of her house, and her money was running out. She needed to get a job.

Well, she thought, setting her chin, after all the months of wandering with Nels in the Southwest, she was an expert on finding jobs. She thanked heaven that New Hampshire had a healthy job economy.

Four hours later Perdy found gainful employment as a cocktail waitress at Mr. Pongo's Lounge on the outskirts of Manchester, the city closest to Mortimerford, the village in which she lived. She felt momentarily triumphant, but as she drove back to the house, her sense of elation dimmed. Sleet began to drive down from the dark sky, and her old blue van slipped and slid on the crooked mountain roads. She added another item to

her list of Things to Spend Money On: snow tires.

SHE COULDN'T believe it the next day when the men brought in the baby grand piano. Ben Squires, Sam said, was due to move in that afternoon, that very afternoon, but he had a new piano sent first.

Perdy watched, with true horror, as one piano leg knocked a chip off the plaster of the entry wall.

"Stop!" she begged, but they didn't. She imagined herself driving the men out of her house with a broom, but after all, there were three of them, and they were piano movers. Even Nels wouldn't have fought those odds.

There were more grunts, more groans, more scratches, more chips, and Perdy fled upstairs to her room.

She felt relieved when she finally heard the moving truck pull away, and decided to venture back downstairs to survey the damage. She was dressed in flowing electric-blue harem pants with a matching top. She had on her gold high-heeled sandals and Esmeralda's snake bracelet. As usual, the more insecure she felt, the more flamboyantly she dressed, to reassure herself. The amount of eye makeup she wore was directly proportional to the stress she felt.

Perdy clenched her fists, vowing silently that Ben Squires would pay for every crack, chip, dent and tear. She was stamping into the living room when she heard the front door opening. She turned and froze.

Ben Squires stood there, his height and broad shoulders almost filling the doorway. He glanced at the slightly crushed wreath on the door. "This has got to go."

He detached it from its nail and threw it into a snowbank.

"You!" she snarled. She tilted her chin up and stood straight as a queen.

"And you." His tone was dismissive. But the same black fire was in his deep-set eyes. "Here you are, decked out like my personal slave girl."

"Oh!" she said, her nostrils quivering in distaste. She gave a disgusted sniff and turned her back to him. With all the dignity she could muster, she marched upstairs into her bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

She sat for a moment on the edge of the lumpy bed, her heart throwing itself against her chest like a panicky deer crashing into an entangling fence.

It is happening. He is really here. He is really moving in, she thought, her mind whirring.

Suddenly the doorknob turned, and he was standing there. His bulky V-neck navy-blue sweater, obviously hand knit, emphasized his broad, square shoulders.

"Get out of here!"

He held out a small rectangular piece of paper. "I came to pay the rent. Here."

Perdy refused to move. "Put it on the bureau," she said tersely, cocking her head in that direction. The old bureau was the only other piece of furniture left in the room.

Immediately after he did so, he sat down beside her on the bed. "We're going to have to get some things straight." His voice was like velvet at her ear. "First of all—" he gave the old bed a disparaging pat "—we're going to have to do something about the heat. It's stifling in here."

"I paid for the oil, and I'll turn the heat as high as I like," she taunted.

His black eyes were surveying her as if memorizing her slowly, bit by bit, from the top of her blue blouse to the tips of her gold slippers. "Oh, yes," he said disdainfully. "You came here from Las Vegas, didn't you? That's what Sam Puckett told me—when everything was a bit more friendly. What were you in Vegas?" he asked softly. "A show girl? And who left you this house—an admirer?" He touched the golden

snake bracelet that wound around her wrist.

"I sewed costumes in Las Vegas," she said acidly. "And the woman who raised me left me this house. So don't get the wrong idea."

She rose abruptly, angered at his presumption and at her body for responding to his nearness. "Get out of here. I don't have to take this."

He, too, rose. He put his warm hands lightly on her upper arms. "But we have things to talk about. The heat. Kitchen privileges. The bathroom. Any number of intimate little things. After all, we are living together."

She shook his hands off impatiently, but her skin tingled. "Don't touch me," she snarled between set teeth. "The way you push yourself into my house, insulting me at Christmastime—the hardest Christmas of my life, too. You're the essence of Grinchness."

"Christmas," he snapped, still standing by her bed. "Don't tell me you're a sentimentalist on top of everything else. Christmas—ha!"

"Yes, Christmas," she fumed, tossing out her jeans from the closet. "Or is your attitude simply the classic *Bah! Humbug?*"

"*Bah, humbug* says it very nicely," he growled. Then she

heard him leave. She almost felt him leave. Suddenly the room seemed too quiet and very, very empty. She had hit a nerve with him at last. Christmas, was it? He didn't like Christmas. Oh, she'd remember that.

SHE EMERGED from her room in jeans and sweater, fake-fur jacket and matching cap. She went downstairs and found Ben sitting in her chair, glowering out the window, her phone in his lap.

"What's wrong?" she gibed. "Did you get all depressed with nobody around to pick on?"

He gave her a quick, cool glance.

"They misrouted my furniture," he growled, his voice like a vocal thunderstorm. "Idiots! It's in Baltimore, Maryland," he grumbled.

"Baltimore!" Perdy laughed. "Ha! Well, at least I have a bed for the night. Enjoy the floor. Bye."

He gave her another of his deadly looks. "Where are you going?" he demanded.

"To work. Some of us don't loll about on our inherited wealth. Tata."

One lean hand darted out like a snake, clenching the dark fur of her jacket sleeve. "And just what kind of work does a girl go to dressed in jeans that tight and

wearing all that makeup?" His smile was appraising but cold.

"I wait tables," she bit off. "Disappointed?"

"No," he said. "Disbelieving. Girls who dress like you don't wait tables. Girls who dress like you are always very well taken care of. Very."

She stared up at him in defiance. Something in the way he was looking at her gave her a warm, dizzy feeling inside.

"You don't know anything at all about girls like me," she said, narrowing her eyes and jerking her arm away.

He gave her a slanted, superior smile. "And maybe you don't know anything about men like me. Yet here we are. Together."

She slung the strap of her purse over her shoulder. "We're not together."

He gave her that cool and slightly crooked smile, then looked out the window toward the mountain. Something in his face seemed to darken, to change. "Of course we are. And you're the one who insisted on staying," he said, displaying his profile. "I came here to be alone."

He was staring out toward the darkness, in the direction of the mountain, almost as if he were looking for something.

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SHE WAS TIRED when she returned from work. The house was dark, but she could see gold flames issuing from a fire in the fireplace.

A fire, Perdy thought in alarm. She didn't even know if the chimney was safe. She hated fires. Yet, even in her jacket, she could feel the chill in the air. He'd turned the heat down!

She tiptoed to the fireplace. There wasn't even a screen. Sparks could leap out. Maybe she should put it out.

Suddenly a strong hand leaped out, seizing her arm. Perdy lost her balance and found herself curled on her side, her back to the fire, staring at the flame-gilded face of Ben Squires. He had built himself a sort of nest by the hearth.

"So you decided to come to me," he said, his voice velvety. His other arm reached over her.

She had a glimpse of a golden face lowering itself to hers, and muscled golden shoulders gleaming in the firelight.

She felt his hard, hot mouth nuzzle the edge of her own, press itself with teasing lightness against her still cold cheek, then move slowly, deftly, to her lips.

His mouth explored hers, tasted her. She felt tantalized; a rush of unexpected pleasure coursed through her body as his kiss be-

came one of power and mastery. It felt so wonderful to be held, to be warmed, to feel life coursing through her. She wanted to be as close to him as possible, her length pressed to his. She needed to keep feeling that amazing surge of life sweeping through her body.

Her bare hand inched down his face to his neck, then rested with tentative wonder on his naked shoulder.

His shoulder was naked! She snatched her hand away as if its sensually smooth hardness could scald her.

He was staring down at her, unsmiling. His dark eyes were hidden by the shadow. "What's wrong, Perdita?" he said mockingly. "We both knew this would happen, from that first night."

"Nothing's going to happen," she protested raggedly, looking at the unrelenting lines of his face. She used both hands to push him away. She stood, almost panting. "You had no right to grab me like that."

"You practically crawled into bed with me," he returned. "I don't like teases, Perdita. Don't play games."

Her anger rose at his gall. "That's one of my blankets," she said contemptuously. "Give it back."

He yawned, stretched luxuriously, his hands locked behind

his dark head. "If you want. But I'm buck naked underneath."

She remembered that he hated Christmas. "Sleep in heavenly peace!" she snapped and stalked off to bed, knowing that somehow the words had done the trick.

PERDY DID NOT sleep in heavenly peace, and she awoke to a hellish racket. The noise seemed to come right out of the wall. It was an off-key bass voice, slightly hoarse. Oh, Lord, thought Perdy. He was in the shower and experimenting with his voice, letting it bounce, reverberate and echo off the tiles. She groaned and rolled over. It was barely daybreak. She tried to tunnel more snugly into the blankets and drifted back to sleep.

She didn't know how long she had drowsed, but again the house was filled with a foreign sound. He was playing his damned piano!

Perdy cursed and reached for her robe and staggered for the bathroom.

He was still playing the piano, alternating Gilbert and Sullivan with cool jazz while she dressed.

He was still hammering away when she marched downstairs into the living room to confront him.

"You used all the hot water! And my towel!" She stamped her foot and flounced into the kitchen.

She felt, rather than saw, him come into the room. She had a

funny tingling in her stomach and at the back of her neck.

"You have a horrible disposition in the morning," he said, as if it gave him untold satisfaction. "Just like my little sister. God help her future husband if he speaks to her before she's had her morning fix of caffeine."

Ignoring him, she made a steaming cup of coffee and leaned against the counter. She wished he'd stop watching her.

"Do you always put on eye makeup first thing in the morning? And dress like you're going out to pose for *Vogue*?"

"Always," Perdy replied stonily.

"Pity," he growled. "I hoped—just maybe—it was all for my benefit. I thought maybe you were inviting me to finish what we started last night."

She stared at him in anger and amazement. It would not happen again. "Dream on," she said, straightening herself to her full five feet nine inches.

"I did. And on and on and on. It was very nice."

He trailed a fingertip along the nape of her neck, then back. She felt her emotions clanging together like cymbals.

His voice was velvety. "Don't tell me you're not made up to tempt me again this morning. I won't believe you." His hand ca-

ressed her right wrist. "Is that how you got this snake bracelet? As a reward for being such a good temptress?" He kissed the nape of her neck, a slow, gentle, exploratory kiss.

She shot her elbow backward into the hard muscles of his stomach and brought her heel down on his instep. She wheeled to face him, her eyes blazing.

He was massaging his midsection. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

"From my father. He was a wrestler. I grew up in a tough world." Her voice shook with emotion. "People like you liked thinking we weren't quite respectable. Well, we were. My family—my family—" She blinked hard. "My family were fine people," she managed to say, fighting the lump in her throat. She tossed her head back, snatched her coffee cup and glowered at him. "So keep your fat paws to yourself."

He gave a suppressed laugh and examined his hands, flexing the long, sensitive fingers. Then his eyes held hers. "If you want to shake hands and come out not fighting for a change, I'm agreeable."

He seemed serious, despite his smile. "No more using up all the hot water," she said firmly. "Or my towel."

"Agreed."

"No more singing in the shower or playing that piano when I'm asleep, either."

He sighed. "Right. As for Christmas, don't overdo it. Try—and I know this is going to be hard for you—to be a little understated about the whole thing. Well—at least you can't outdo a department store for Christmas madness with the whole pushy, greedy rush."

They shook hands, a brief and thoroughly businesslike shake. He had the most beautiful masculine hands she had ever seen.

"Why don't you like Christmas, anyway?" she asked. "Is it your department store? With all those cash registers playing 'Jingle Bells'? You should love it."

He snorted impatiently. "Toynbee's shareholders love it. My family like having their stockings stuffed with Christmas profits while I manage a ten-ring circus. Pushing shoppers, griping department managers, worn-out clerks, yuletide shoplifters, pickpockets." He shrugged. "Maybe that's why I escaped this year."

He paced restlessly to the window, looking out at the mountain as if it held some secret that would yield only if he looked long and hard enough.

"Ben?" Her throaty voice was gentler than usual. "Why did you want this house? My house?"

He was silent for a few moments. "Easy," he said at last. "The view. I used to spend a lot of time on that mountain. With my uncle. Uncle Ben. The lovable old village doctor. I wanted to grow up to be just like him."

He turned and faced her. His black eyebrow cocked cynically. "I was a nice fellow in those days, Perdy. Believe it or not. I was even happy. I came back to get to know the mountain again, to try to figure out everything that's happened. Because, as my family will tell you, I'm not a nice fellow any longer."

The wind outside blew more sharply and cruelly.

She glanced at him, studying his stern, dark features. "You don't like your family much, do you?"

"Like them all right," he muttered. "I just never gave a damn about the things they held dearest, such as being a pillar of high society. But now I am the very prop and foundation of their genteel fortunes. My brother used to try to tell me I was adopted. I'd punch him and say, 'Good! Who wants to be related to you?'" he said without smiling. "But one doesn't speak ill of the dead, does one?" Suddenly his face looked harder than ever, as if all his thoughts had gone elsewhere, deep within.

The dead? Was his brother dead?

He looked down at her, as if he had suddenly remembered she was there and her presence surprised him.

"What about you?" he asked. "Your family."

She turned her head, hoping he wouldn't see her sudden film of tears. "They're gone," she said simply.

"And you miss them." It was a statement.

She stared off into the distance. She nodded.

He put his forefinger under her chin and turned her face back toward him. In that instant, she felt something pass between them, knew that something had subtly changed between them. She was certain of it. Her heart felt as if it had momentarily stopped beating, then had to race to catch up.

Something's happening, she thought in bewilderment. Something I don't understand.

THE LONG DAY took on a surreal atmosphere of domesticity, while outside the wind rose higher and screamed. Ben took one short trip to town.

That evening the furnace died.

"But you've got to come tonight," Perdy found herself begging the furnace man. "I can already feel how cold it's getting."

"Lady," he said majestically, "stand in line. I'll be there when

you see me. Maybe tomorrow, maybe the next day—if you're lucky."

Perdy hung up the phone and shook her fist. "I wish I was in Cloverdale."

Ben gave her a dark look. "There are furnaces in Cloverdale, too. And they break, just like everywhere else."

She wasn't amused.

"Perdy," he said at last. "Just what kind of situation are you getting yourself into in Indiana?"

"I'm buying a fabric shop," she said defensively. She certainly wasn't going to tell Ben she'd never even seen the shop. She set her mouth stubbornly. "I'll do just fine." But it was more of an incantation, a prayer to the gods, than a statement of conviction.

She drew up her knees and encircled them with her arms. Cold was seeping into the house fast. The chill nibbled into her flesh, into her bones.

He rose, went to the closet and got out his parka, draping it around her shaking shoulders. He threw another scrap of wood on the small fire. She shivered again and tried to draw his jacket more tightly around her.

"It's not going to work," he said. "The wood's green."

"Why don't you just burn some money?" Perdy said irritably.

He shrugged his wide shoulders. "Maybe I'll just stand here awhile, watching you turn blue."

"What are we going to do?"

"Simple." One black brow slanted with amusement. "We go to bed."

Her eyes widened in disbelief.

He raised a hand in pacification. "I will behave. We don't have much choice. We each have something the other wants. You have a bed. But I have something you'll desire even more: An electric blanket. I went shopping in the village today."

She exhaled very carefully and saw her breath. "Why don't you just let me have the blanket. You could go to a motel."

"It's Christmastime," he answered easily. "Every motel between here and Vermont is full. Now get ready for bed. I'll warm up the blanket."

This is insane, she thought as she took out her contacts and slipped into her warmest nightgown. She crept into the darkened room, groped for the bed and found the covers turned back.

Am I really doing this? she asked herself again. But the heat felt like heaven itself. She slipped, shivering, into the bed. Her heart pounded, and she realized, with foreboding, that the bed sagged in the middle. They were both sliding toward the center. Soon they were

tangled together. Her breasts pressed against his bare chest.

"Look," she gasped, trying to inch up the incline of the bed. "This isn't going to work."

He had tried to turn, but his broad shoulder had once again pinned the loose fabric of her gown, this time at the back, pulling it tight against her sensitive breasts.

"Yes it can." He leaned on his elbow, rearranging the blanket and her. "Like this, with your back to me. Now let me fit my body against yours, as if we're a pair of spoons."

His chest fitted against her back, his loins against her hips, his long legs curving to rest against the lines of her slightly curled ones. The warmth of his bare arm settled around her, drawing her nearer to him.

"There. Now sleep." He was so close she could feel his breath in her hair. "I'll keep my promise. Good night now."

"Good night," she managed at last, her voice barely audible. Her heart was beating wildly.

It was a long time before she could let her muscles ease, snuggle more closely against him and drift to sleep. She dreamed she was sixteen again, passing through Cloverdale...

Only the town was not the same. It was not home. She felt suddenly

lost. She stirred uneasily in her sleep, whimpered. A strong arm tightened around her.

She sighed and sank back into her dreams. In their velvet mists she thought: *I am home. I'm finally home.*

She awoke only once more during the night, when he mumbled something in his sleep. She blinked awake, then drowsily let her eyes fall shut. Had he spoken to her? Then the word came from him again, in a low, sleepy, unhappy voice. He said a woman's name.

But it was not hers.

*

PERDY FINISHED blending her eye shadow, then hugged herself for warmth, staring into the mirror. She studied herself for signs of dissipation, moral decay.

"I haven't done anything wrong," she muttered back to her reflection, unconvinced.

What do you say to a man after you've spent the night in his arms? She had no idea.

What was she going to do about her own feelings? She remembered his ragged utterance of another woman's name. What had it been? Sharon? Sheila? Shirley?

Just as she began descending the stairs, she heard the phone ring. Ben answered it. Maybe it was Sam, she hoped, finally getting her out of this mess. But when she

heard Ben talking, she paused, her hand on the banister.

"Look, darling, I told Algie not to give anybody this number."

Perdy's back stiffened. Who was he calling "darling"?

"Cheryl," he sighed. "I'm fine. I just need to be by myself."

Cheryl, she thought. Had that been the name he'd uttered in his sleep?

"Cheryl," he growled, "do anything you want about the wedding. I told you, spare no expense. Of course, I'm not going to walk out on you at the last minute."

Wedding? Perdy thought, her stomach churning as if she were going to be sick.

"Yes, Cheryl," he said, a note of weariness in his voice. "I think you'll look lovely in ivory silk. Yes, I think the Mediterranean would be splendid for a honeymoon. Yes, dammit, I'm fine. But don't call me here again, all right? Fine, darling. Yes, yes, yes, I know. I love you, too."

A wedding and a honeymoon in the Mediterranean, she thought, feeling another sickening wave.

She heard him say goodbye, hang up the phone and go into the kitchen. She continued down the stairs and went into the kitchen to make her coffee. What kind of man went off and left the woman he loved at Christmas, while he

cavalierly tried to seduce the first girl who crossed his path?

Ben stood at the counter, eating scrambled eggs. He wore his shearling coat over a heavy red ski sweater.

"Good morning, Perdy," he said easily. "Have a good night?"

"I've had better," she replied coldly.

"You know," he offered, "I don't think you've had better nights at all—have you?"

"My nights are no concern of yours," she said stiffly. "And you were right. You're not a very nice man at all."

Yesterday's illusion of companionship was gone.

She planned her day carefully. She took a walk, just to get away from him. At four, she decided to leave for work early, stop in the village and buy her own electric blanket. She wasn't spending another night beside him—beside somebody else's fiancé.

She changed, snatched up her gloves and ran out the door, hatless.

Then, shivering, she sat at the wheel of the van, trying to start it. The motor gave a sick chug, a grating cry, and died. She tried again and again. She swore.

She tried again, biting her lower lip. She hit the steering wheel with a frustrated thump. She looked out

the window and saw Ben standing at the side of the van.

"What's wrong now?" he asked, as if his patience, like her own, was at its fraying end.

"The van won't start," she said miserably, getting out.

"Oh, come on," he said gruffly, giving her shoulder a shake. She flinched from his touch. "You're not going to let one more measly disaster get you down, are you? I'll drive you."

His hand was on her arm, and she let him draw her out of her seat, fatalistically let him lead her to his car, the onyx black BMW.

He started the car and they set out in strained silence. She stared straight ahead for the rest of the ride.

He walked her to the door of the lounge, in spite of her protestations. "There," he said, by the side entrance. "Another domestic crisis weathered together. This is getting to be almost like a marriage, Perdy."

Marriage indeed, she thought. It was obviously a word he took lightly.

BEN CAME to pick her up early, and she could see the disapproval in his eyes as he watched her go from table to table announcing the last call for drinks. She supposed she did look thoroughly disreputable in the little red costume with its sequins

and fur trim and the black net stockings. He waited in the entrance as she quickly changed.

"Can't you find a better job than that? A girl with your resources must have something to fall back on?" he challenged as soon as they were in the car.

"I took the first job I could get," she replied defensively. "I've got debts mounting up. Remember?"

With a sinking feeling she remembered she hadn't had a chance to buy an electric blanket.

He seemed to read her thoughts. "Stiff upper lip, Perdy. I called about my furniture and it'll be here tomorrow. Don't worry. I'll be pure as the driven snow."

She would too, she vowed.

They finally reached the house. Perdy threw her cape over the gold chair.

"I put up a tree for you." Ben nodded toward the corner of the room.

The little tree, scrawny and bare, stood there, its trunk wedged between a pair of heavy stones.

"Oh." She was touched. He must have hated doing that. He was such a puzzling man. "You didn't have to," she said, her voice throatier than usual.

"I've made your Christmas tough enough already," he said gruffly. "I'm not very nice to be around this time of year. Which is

probably why you haven't been so nice today yourself. I don't blame you." Their eyes met. "I'm going to bed," he said. "Will you be coming up soon?"

She shook her head. "No. Not soon. Not for a long time."

She was afraid. It would be so easy for him to make love to her. One last, meaningless affair before he married Cheryl. But it wouldn't be meaningless for her—she was beginning to understand that it wouldn't be that way for her at all. She had tried and tried to withstand his attraction and had failed.

The cold began to creep into her. Perdy knew she couldn't sit in the living room all night. She'd freeze. At last she went upstairs and slipped into bed beside him. He was asleep. She could tell by his breathing.

He stirred, and as she lay, tense and filled with forbidden yearning, he drew her to him, into the same position in which they had slept the night before.

She knew that if he so much as breathed her name, it would take all her moral strength not to turn to him, as wrong as it would be.

*

PERDY WAS awakened by a thud, much like that of a falling appliance striking cement. Footsteps echoed, voices boomed, and there

was the sound of objects being shifted and reshifted. Ben's movers were here.

Groaning, she fled to the bathroom to put on her makeup. She fluffed up her bangs as best she could and headed downstairs to the living room where she nearly collided with a burly man carrying an enormous box.

"Watch it, lady," he growled, sidestepping her and giving her a nasty look.

"You watch it," she snapped back.

Ben appeared from the kitchen. He had a cup of coffee in his hand, which he made her take.

"Drink this," he ordered, his mouth twisting at the edge. "Remember, I know what you're like before you've had your coffee. That's the wonderful thing about living with a woman. You get to know her so well. This place is chaotic enough without you murdering the moving men."

Perdy drank two more cups of coffee and ate a stale cracker spread with even staler peanut butter. She'd been eating nothing but crackers and peanut butter since noon the day before. She was feeling edgy.

She threaded her way between moving men and cartons to the phone, which now sat on an antique pine end table, next to an oversize brown velvet couch. She

dialled the garage and told them her van wouldn't start. The man on the other end told her they would send a tow truck.

Ben's furniture made Esmeralda's house seem somehow foreign, transformed. The living room now looked rich and masculine, the furniture expensive.

Her unhappy reveries were interrupted by the arrival of the furnace man. He descended into the basement, where his rattles, rumbles and banging lasted for about an hour.

Then, emerging from the basement, sooty but imperious, he handed her a bill that made her heart stop beating.

Ben came in and threw himself full-length on the couch, putting his hands behind his head. "I see we have heat again," he said cheerfully. "Happy?"

"I'm ecstatic," she retorted. "Poverty always makes me ecstatic."

"Tsk, ts," he said, shaking his head ruefully. "Maybe you should sell your jewelry. You'll survive."

No thanks to you, she thought. The doorbell rang, and she went to answer it. This time it was a thin boy from the garage.

She grabbed her jacket and went out to the van with him. He muttered sinister things about solenoids and flywheels with broken teeth. "Well, we're probably

talkin' a couple hundred all told. Too bad."

With a sinking heart she watched him pull away the van, which hung suspended from a chain like a small dead whale. Perdy shoved her hands into her pockets and, head down, walked back into the house.

Ben was on the phone, his lean face dark. "I mean it, Cheryl. Please stop calling. I don't give a damn about Christmas. I just want to be by myself—can't you understand that?"

He set the receiver down irritably. Perdy looked at him, appalled. "How can you treat that poor girl like that? You're making her Christmas miserable."

"Christmas—is there no end to it?"

He stalked upstairs. She heard him hammering: hanging pictures, no doubt, and ruining Esmeralda's plaster.

At least he had his own bed now, but even that didn't seem safety enough. She wanted to get away from him, away from his Prince-of-Darkness attractiveness, his hatred of Christmas, his stormy engagement to the luckless Cheryl.

Everything was tumbling down around her. Only days ago she'd been sure she had her life in order, ready to start over on a sane course in Cloverdale. She had been sure she could handle Ben Squires. But

she'd been miserably wrong on both counts. She wasn't even certain she should go to Cloverdale at all. But if not, where could she go?

She tried to distract herself by decorating the little tree. It didn't help. Even loaded with her crocheted ornaments, the tree looked scrawny. She stood studying it—the one touch of her in the room. It made sense that it looked inadequate, out of place.

She glanced coldly at Ben when he came downstairs.

A muscle twitched in his cheek. "Why don't you flatter me like other women do? Tell me how wonderful I am and how pretty and green my money is?"

"I don't care about your pretty green money," she said, uneasy at his nearness.

"No," he answered. "I really don't think you do."

Ben pulled her to him, his arm holding her close. "This house has the view I used to have from my room when I was a kid, staying at my uncle's cabin. God, how I loved it there." His face glowed.

She could almost see him, young and lean and bronzed. She sensed the boy had been very different from the man; he had taken deep joy from life then. She studied the easy smile that curved his normally stern lips. "How long since you've been back here?"

The smile went away, the light in his face dimmed. The familiar, cynical look returned. "Ten years. Ten years ago today, in fact. Right before Christmas."

She could feel the old tension coursing through him. She wished she could see him recapture that brief moment of happiness.

"Now all I want is a sensible life. I came back to see if it's too late."

A sensible life, Perdy thought. That, too, was all she wanted.

Suddenly his head dipped, and before she knew what was happening, Ben had taken her face between his hands and pressed his lips against her own.

It was a brief kiss, just long enough for it to reveal, then hide again, the warmth within.

He raised his head and stared down at her. She was about to say he shouldn't have done it; she shouldn't have allowed it; he was, after all, engaged. But he stepped back easily, as if he'd already forgotten he'd touched her.

THE REST of their day together was maddeningly pleasant. The perfect gentleman, Ben tried to coax her into sharing his dinner of swordfish steak. He said he was concerned about her eating habits; she was worse than his preppie sister who subsisted on Häagen-Dazs ice cream and shrimp cock-

tail. Perdy refused, and dined on crackers and peanut butter.

The perfect gentleman, he drove her to work and told her he would pick her up at quitting time. He acted absolutely protective, and it disturbed her, because she liked it.

The lounge kept Perdy on the run. She let her tasks occupy the surface of her mind, but its depths were busily occupied with thoughts of Ben. She felt dazed, a bit stunned. She was in love with him, and she knew it.

I'm standing in a bar in Manchester, New Hampshire, wearing a silly red costume with white rabbit fur. I am carrying a tray of drinks and practically talking to myself, because I've fallen in love with a gentleman who's no gentleman at all. He belongs to somebody else. I should have my head examined. How did this ever happen?

She was grateful at last call when the holiday revelers in the lounge became so rowdy she could no longer think of anything else.

"Well, look what Santy Claus brung," a man said when Perdy delivered the drinks. "Those legs look like they go clear up to your neck, baby. Just how high do they go?"

He groped to feel her netted thigh, but she dodged him nimbly. "About twice as high as your IQ,"

she said, shooting him a deadly look.

The other men gave beery hoots of laughter, but he did not. She wished she'd eaten more; she was having a spell of light-headedness.

The man yanked her close to him. "Stop actin' so stuck up. Or I'll make you sorry." He jerked her onto his lap with a surprisingly fast movement.

"You asked for it," she replied evenly. With a lightning stroke she shot her elbow hard against his collarbone. Perdy sprang from his hold and fled.

The troublemaker threw a scowl over his shoulder at Perdy, who had taken refuge behind the bar. She collided with a tall, hard body. It was Ben, and his expression was anything but gentlemanly.

His black-gloved hands were on her bare shoulders. "I came just in time to witness that little drama," he said acidly. "How many times a night does an ape like that try to maul you?"

She tried to chase the butterfly out of her throat. "He just happened to be slower at taking hints than most."

"Dammit!" He shook his head, his straight brows drawn together. "Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right," she said, embarrassed at the turmoil his nearness was creating in her. "I'm used to this kind of thing."

"Just what kind of life have you led?"

"Not your kind, obviously," she said, stung by his criticism.

He was angry about something. It was more than the scene with the drunk; she could feel it.

She was grateful it was quitting time. She was emotionally drained.

Ben drew her close to him once they were in the car. "Sure you're all right?"

He kissed her, a long, possessive kiss, one that was tender yet hungry. He seemed to be trembling slightly himself—whether with cold or emotion, she did not know.

He pulled back. "You're the most impossible, improbable creature I've ever met. And you're making me forget that I'm extremely mad at you." Perdy was silent. "We've got to talk, Perdy. I've got a few things to say to you."

A FEW MINUTES later she and Ben were sitting in an all-night doughnut shop. Perdy stared at her doughnut, untouched on its napkin. Ben seemed to have reverted to his usual coldblooded self. His face had that distant look again. She could sense anger rising in him.

"While you were at work tonight, I went through your papers. Your contracts on the house, on the business in Cloverdale. Your

bankbook. All those things you left lying so conveniently on your dresser."

Disbelief and anger rushed through her system like wildfire. "You what? You had no right—"

He set his jaw. "You're in trouble. Big financial trouble." His hands tightened around hers.

She held her chin high. "I told you a hundred times I couldn't afford this—this stupid gore-area mess. I told you!"

He stared at her in disbelief. "You really couldn't afford to move out, could you? The expensive bracelet—that threw me off."

"What bracelet? What are you talking about?"

"The snake bracelet," he returned, still holding both her hands tightly. "The one you always wear."

"That thing? It's not worth anything," she said in confusion. "Esmeralda got it in a box of things at an auction."

He shook his head in disbelief. "Perdy, the thing's real gold. How could I believe you were broke when you were sporting a thing like that?"

"How am I supposed to know what real gold looks like?" she asked, trying to hold back the tears.

"I didn't believe you," he said, his eyes boring into hers. "Not until I saw you actually working in

that dive. I thought you were eating peanut butter because you were a junk food addict or something, not because your back was against the wall. Then I looked through your papers for the business in Cloverdale. How could you be such a fool? The building may be falling down—"

She blinked back tears. "I'll prop it back up. I'll sell the bracelet."

He seized her wrist. "A business can eat a thousand dollars in one bite."

She turned her eyes away, staring stubbornly at the counter.

"How did you ever get into this situation? How did you end up in New Hampshire with a house and nothing else? Where did you come from?" He threw an old, seamed envelope on the table between them. "And who are these people?"

She stared down. The envelope was full of snapshots. She had found them, cleaning out Esmeralda's dresser drawers. He had no right looking at them. There was a picture of Nels, in his halcyon days as the Black Viking. Her eyes moved to another snapshot of Nels making a ferocious face at the camera. "My father. Before and after the accident. He was burned."

"My God, Perdy," he said, his voice unbelieving.

In the foreground of another snapshot, she stood between Frankie and Esmeralda. She was eleven years old, with big glasses and braces on her grinning teeth. She was already taller than either Esmeralda or Frankie.

"The funny-looking kid is me," she said between her teeth. "That's Frankie and Esmeralda. They were like parents to me." She snatched the pictures away. "If you're through with me, will you please take me home? And then stay out of my way?"

He watched her as she tried to struggle into her jacket. "I didn't understand, and I didn't mean to hurt you. But I'm not through with you. Cloverdale's got disaster written all over it, in letters a mile high. But I can help you. I've got a much better business proposition for you."

She tossed him a hot-blooded glance. "I don't want anything from you. Ever."

His black eyes read her brown ones, disregarded the message, then settled on her lips. "I'd like to take care of you. I'd like you to be my mistress," he offered, as casually as if he were offering her another cup of coffee.

She sprang up from her seat, breathing hard. She felt the most violent flood of emotions she had ever experienced in her life. She opened her mouth, but someone

had stolen her voice. She looked wildly around the shop. All the doughnuts were staring at her. One winked. It winked again. Then they all began to wink and wink and wink.

Then, for the first time in her life, she fainted.

*

"THAT," growled Ben, kissing the back of her neck, "was the most Victorian thing I've ever seen in my life. I make a friendly indecent proposition, and you swoon. Oh, stop pretending. I know you're awake."

She wriggled away, burying her head under the pillow. He had made her sleep in his bed because it was more comfortable. He had taken hers. She was not only awake, but still reeling with embarrassment at having fainted in a doughnut shop, of all places.

"I brought you breakfast." He pried her fingers loose from the pillow and lifted it away. "I owe you an apology," he stated calmly. "I should have seen you were getting woozy."

She finished a forkful of eggs. "You owe me an apology all right." She cast him a murderous glance. "For snooping. And having the gall to think I'd be interested in being your—"

She couldn't say the word *mistress*.

He shrugged noncommittally. "Stop pretending you hate me. You don't. You haven't had your coffee. I forgot how utterly vile you are in the morning. Drink up. Then we'll talk."

She gave him a poisonous look. "We got nothing to talk about. It's Christmas Eve tonight. Shouldn't you be out strangling reindeer?"

Suddenly his black eyes got that faraway look. "How odd. Christmas. I forgot. All I was thinking of was you."

She finished her coffee and he poured her another cup from a silver pot on the tray.

"You've got to get this Cloverdale business out of your head, Perdy." He spoke slowly and distinctly, as if he were speaking to a child. "I had Algie check it out."

Her fingers tightened around the cup. "You did what?"

He nodded curtly, his eyes holding hers. "I sent Algie to Cloverdale. The place needs a new furnace, and there's extensive water damage from a leaky roof. There's termite damage. The seller was waiting for a sucker, and you almost walked into his open arms. That's your dream shop."

Perdy felt her jaw trembling. "You're really making this a great Christmas, you know that?"

She bit her lip. She felt cold and empty. Cloverdale was a mirage, nothing more. Its lure had kept her

moving desperately—toward the dream. But the dream wavered, shimmered sinisterly. It disappeared. Tears rested on her lower lashes.

"I'm sorry," he said. He gently wiped the tears away with his hand. "Why don't you stay here with me? Or you could come to Boston. We could use this place as a retreat. I could give you your own boutique in Toynbee's."

She blinked hard, then squeezed her eyes shut. "Just leave me alone," she said at last, dully. She gave a bitter laugh. "You seem to forget—it was the house, not me, that was for sale."

His gravelly voice was careful and controlled. "We get along, Perdy, even when we argue. How many people can argue and have fun at the same time? You make me forget the dark side of things."

She shot him a killing glance. "I amuse you! How nice! I doubt, however, if I'll amuse Cheryl. Don't you remember you're planning to walk her down the aisle?" Angry and humiliated, she pressed her face into the pillow.

"Cheryl?" he rasped, amazement in his voice. "What's my sister got to do with this? Yes, I'm walking her down the aisle—to give her away."

Her eyes popped open. She raised herself on her elbow and

turned to stare at him. "To give her away?"

He studied her, one eyebrow rising in consternation and amusement. "Who did you think Cheryl was?"

"Your fiancée," she said, her eyes holding his gaze. He put his hand on her shoulder, and it seemed to burn through her nervous system.

He laughed. He shook his head. "I'm not somebody else's man. I just want you to be my woman." His hand moved slowly down her arm, stroked the fine bones of her wrist. "I'll be honest. I never intend to marry again. Never. But I'll see that you're kept comfortably."

Her eyes widened. Marry again? This was the first time he'd ever mentioned having been married. He wanted no more permanent relationships—just neat, contractual ones.

"Don't pretend you don't care for me, Perdy," he murmured, bending nearer, his voice low. "Don't even try." Almost lazily he reached out for her and wrapped his arms around her. His mouth claimed hers as if it were some sort of rich inheritance he had been waiting too long for.

She gasped, enraptured by his touch, feeling she was turning into liquid.

He sighed. "See," he demanded. "You do want me." His

dark head bent closer, kissing the space between her breasts.

She looked at the strong tendons on his neck. "Yes," she said, her breath uneven. "I want you, too."

"I'll take excellent care of you, darling," he said. "You're going to be the best investment I ever made."

His words jolted her, chilling her heated body. She loved him, and she had been ready to give him everything. But he wanted only to purchase her for a while.

She pushed away from him, scrambling from the bed. "I said I wanted you," she said between gritted teeth. "And once, when I was little, I wanted a bottle of something in the medicine cabinet. It was beautiful and green. It looked delicious. It was poison." She started to stamp barefoot from his bedroom. "And you're poison, Ben Squires."

She fled into her own bedroom and slammed the door.

She rummaged through her closet for clothes, trying to ignore his banging on the door. "Open up!" he commanded. "Open this door and talk to me."

Mustering all her strength, Perdy put her arms against the chest of drawers and shoved it in front of the door.

"Stay away from me, you snake!" she commanded back. "I

don't know how you got the way you are, and I don't care. I don't know what happened to your wife, but whatever it was, I hope it hurt you plenty. No wonder you hate Christmas—it's a season of love, and who could love you?"

There was palpable and ominous silence from the other side of the door. Then she heard him walk away. A few moments later, she heard him slam the front door. Then she heard the roar of tires as he backed the BMW, full speed, out of the driveway.

HE DIDN'T COME BACK all afternoon, and she was glad. The garage called, saying her van was ready; she was grateful for that as well.

The lounge closed early because it was Christmas Eve, and the house was completely dark when she drove up. She didn't see Ben's car.

She unlocked the door, kicked off her boots and trudged into the living room. She felt sick with emptiness.

She stretched her slender hand toward the piano and began to play a carol.

What child is this
who laid to rest
on Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with an-
thems sweet—

"Don't." She felt a hand grip her wrist tightly. "Not that."

She backed away, startled, and he released her immediately. She smelled Scotch. He'd been drinking.

She moved to switch on a lamp. His face looked haggard. She picked up the nearly empty Scotch bottle from the floor beside the couch.

He thrust his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "I just came back for a few things. Don't worry. I'm still buying the house."

She stared at him in disbelief.

"Just promise me you won't buy that shop in Cloverdale. I can save you from that, at least. I'll move out until you can settle elsewhere."

She sank down on the couch. "I don't understand," she said numbly.

He gave one of his short, derisive barks of laughter. Then he sighed with great weariness. "I'm tired. I'm tired of being a bastard who can't love anybody. So I'm setting you free."

It was already too late for her, she thought. She couldn't be free if she wanted to.

He gazed back out the window at the mountain. "I was up on that mountain ten years ago," he said in a low voice. "I was waiting there for Sharon—my wife. Things weren't going well between us."

His words jolted her. Sharon—that was the name he had muttered in his troubled sleep. Not Cheryl, his sister. Sharon, his wife.

"She was supposed to join me on Christmas Eve. She'd been off at her aunt's, in Vermont." He leaned over and picked up the Scotch bottle. He poured the remainder into a glass. He took a long sip.

"The truth is she wasn't in Vermont. And my brother, Christopher, wasn't on the business trip he was supposed to be on. They were together. Up in Maine, in a ski cabin."

She felt a wave of nausea wash through her.

"A space heater malfunctioned in their bedroom." He smiled grimly and held out his glass as if toasting her. "They died painlessly in each other's arms of carbon monoxide poisoning. They were naked, of course. Which is not the sort of story a family like mine cares to have circulated." He threw back his head, took another stiff drink. "With a lot of lying and a lot of money, we made certain the truth never got out."

She wanted to rise and go to him, to put her arms around him, but something dark and dangerous in his eyes kept her frozen.

He held his glass out toward her again. "The most ironic part is that the autopsy showed Sharon

was pregnant. To my dying day, I'll never know if that child—that innocent child—was mine or my brother's. That gives me something to think of every Christmas. Cheers."

He tossed the last of the Scotch down, his face twisted.

Perdy sat, her hands clenched tightly together in her lap. A muscle worked in his jaw. She could think of nothing to say. She wanted only to go to him, to put her arms around him. She wanted him to forget the past.

"Don't look at me as if you'd tear out your heart and hand it to me if I wanted it. You were right. I'm poison. And I'm poisoned. You deserve better."

He made his way to the hall.

She stood up, her hands falling helplessly to her sides. "Don't go," she said. He was already closing the door behind him. "Ben, don't go!"

She raced out. Clouds of snow churned up from under his car wheels. She stood watching until his headlights disappeared. In the village, church bells rang because it was midnight. It was Christmas.

She sank to her knees in the snow and wept.

*

SHE HAD SPENT an uneasy night on the couch. She had relived the terrible taunts she had made to him

about Christmas, knowing now how deeply her words must have stabbed him.

She went for a long walk to the edge of the mountain and came back to the empty house.

She tried to think of what she was going to do and could not. She couldn't think about Cloverdale at all. How silly and childish it seemed to her now. Home wasn't a place; home was people. Home was someone she had found briefly, then lost.

Oh, she thought, wearily, I can't think about this any longer. I'll drive myself mad. She felt sick with grief and longing and loss.

Then she heard a loud vehicle pull up outside. It sounded like a truck of some sort.

She looked out the bay window. A massive green truck was parked in the drive and two burly men trudged toward her door, each carrying two large vases loaded with white roses. She ran to the door. "What is this?" she asked.

"Don't ask me, lady. I just take orders," one rasped.

Without another word they passed her, and began setting the vases on the living-room floor. They trudged back out the door. In a few moments they returned with more roses. And more. And more.

"Look," she said desperately. "There's some mistake here!"

"No mistake," the deliveryman replied laconically. "There's more," the man said tonelessly.

"Well, how many more?" she pleaded, staring at the engulfing sea of flowers.

"Altogether—" the man frowned—"a thousand. Somebody did a lot of callin' around."

The men continued lugging the roses in—all white. They covered most of the living-room floor, the piano, the occasional tables, the kitchen floor, the kitchen table.

"Stop!" she begged them. "There's no more room." *Well, she said to herself, I have actually done it. I have actually gone mad.* Insanity wasn't so bad after all. At least it smelled good.

"That's it," the man finally said. He tipped his cap and disappeared out the door.

"What am I going to do?" she cried aloud, listening to the truck pull away. "It looks like somebody died here!"

"No," said a familiar low voice. "Just the opposite. Somebody came back to life."

She turned around. Ben Squires stood in the open doorway, his height nearly filling it. He held a Christmas tree decorated with feathery white doves and red silken hearts.

He looked slightly embarrassed. "I thought you ought to have a proper tree."

Her heart was leaping as if it would fly out of her chest and go soaring over the mountain. He was back. He was really back.

He leaned the tree against the wall and wrapped her in his strong arms. "I love you. And I want to marry you. And, like a fool, I nearly lost you."

If she was dreaming, she didn't want to wake up. Had he actually said he wanted to marry her?

"I don't think there's room for your tree inside," she laughed, her arms going around his neck. "It's full of roses."

"Ah. Yes. Well. That." Chagrin was in his deep voice. "Scrooge got converted, darling. All night long the ghosts of Christmas past chased me around. They're very convincing fellows, those ghosts."

She drew back to look into his face. He was grinning ironically at her, his black eyes full of life.

He pulled her back against him. "The drunker I got last night, the more I thought of you. I said I couldn't love you—but I already did. I was too much a fool to admit it until I walked away. I think I loved you from the first night, when you opened the door, your head so high that I knew Algie would never be a match for you. I loved you. I do love you. I'll always love you."

He pressed his lips against her hair. "When I left you here last

night, I didn't leave you at all. You were in my mind, in my blood. You haunted me. You became my Ghost of Christmas Present." His hands framed her face. "But what put me over the edge was the Ghost of Christmas Future—of any future without you. So don't go out of my future—marry me."

She wound her arms around his neck, kissing him deeply. "Yes. Yes," she whispered against his lips. "Yes, yes, yes, I love you, too." She drew back a bit, her eyes shining. "But, Ben—why did you send all these roses?"

His smile was endearingly embarrassed. He licked his lips. "Well... I figured a dozen roses would never say how sorry I was. So I sent a thousand. I was still a little drunk when I thought that up. I called my secretary, and I believe I rashly promised her two weeks in Bermuda if she could pull it off."

He swung her up into his arms and made his way through all the roses.

He grinned, then kissed her. "Listen, Perdy, do you know what this means? We're going to have very tall children."

She nodded. "They'll be dark, too."

"With long legs," he added.

"And deep voices," she said. "I like it. We'll all match."

"Perfectly," he said, and kissed her. "Do you want to see your

ring? I drove to Toynbee's, opened it up and picked out the biggest diamond we had."

"Later," she breathed. "First kiss me some more."

He did, and very thoroughly.

"Perdy," Esmeralda had always said, "I have the feeling that one of these days you're going to find a heck of a man. Just one heck of a man."



**Solution to
CROSSWORD #21 VOL.4 NO. 3**


	E	A	R		C	O	M	B		R	E	B	U	T
M	E	S	A		A	N	I	L		E	M	O	T	E
A	R	T	Y		S	E	R	E		F	I	R	E	D
P	I	E			T	R	E	A	S	U	R	E	S	
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	R	E	A	S	S	E	R	T	S			R	O	N
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**JENNY
McGUIRE**
**Christmas
Wishes**



Reba had one Christmas wish—that Jase would somehow find it in his heart to forgive her for having lied to him about how she came into his life.



Hunt's Point. Lakeside estates for some of Seattle's most rich and famous. Reba McCallister hated sneaking around like this. Every minute that dragged by put her more on edge. Her shoulders felt kinked and her slim legs cramped. She used to think her average frame fit neatly into her old Volkswagen bug, but now in her tense state she felt about to burst out of the confining space. She reached for the newspaper society page that had begun this quest.

She'd often read the local, suburban paper in the nurses' lounge when she took a break from her emergency-room duties. Like most people, she took vicarious pleasure at viewing candid photographs of the local high society and reading juicy bits of gossip. This time a photographer must have approached the Kingsford house from the water side and used a telephoto lens. The close-up shot showed a young girl smiling as she opened a large gift-wrapped box. Reba scanned the caption.

No boys or adults allowed. That seemed to be the theme of Rebecca Marie Kingsford's twelfth birthday party,

celebrated by a bevy of young beauties on the lawn of the family's million-dollar estate. Becky is the adopted daughter of *Seattle Examiner* owner-editor Jason Kingsford. Becky's adoptive mother, Carolyn Kingsford, a leader in Seattle society events, died a year ago.

For the hundredth time Reba studied the photograph, examining every detail of Becky Kingsford's face. It was uncanny! Every feature appeared to have skipped a generation. The photo might have been of Reba's mother as a young girl.

Movement ahead attracted Reba's attention. Out of the driveway came an olive-green Bronco with a sandy-haired, broad-shouldered man at the wheel and a blond girl at his side.

She was in luck! It must be Jason Kingsford and his daughter, Becky.

Reba's palms became damp with nervous perspiration as she followed them out of Hunt's Point, onto the freeway, then off again to enter a residential area some miles east. The Bronco turned through

twin brick gateposts, above which arched a sign reading Forest Park Stables.

Reba had just found a spot to park when she saw Becky hop out of the Bronco. Reba knew she should just turn around and leave. But as soon as Jason Kingsford drove away, she found herself heading after Becky.

Inside, the pleasant, earthy aroma of horses filled her nostrils. Reba looked over to see a stern-faced instructor assembling a group of youngsters for an English-style riding lesson. Becky was nowhere to be seen, but Reba suspected it was this lesson she'd been running to.

It didn't take long for her hunch to pay off. Becky, now wearing canary breeches and knee-high black riding boots, came jogging down the aisle toward her. As she approached, her gait slowed to a limping hop-step.

"Oh, great! I've got something in my boot. And I'm late already!" With a sigh of frustration she sank down next to Reba and began struggling to remove one of her boots.

"Can I help?" Reba asked, hoping the thumping of her heart wasn't loud enough to be heard.

Becky looked up, and Reba's breath caught in her throat. There in the girl's right eye was a brown spot in the blue cornea identical to

the one Reba's mother had possessed.

This was her child!

She'd been only sixteen when she'd signed the papers for Becky's adoption, and now she'd found the daughter she'd thought was lost to her forever. Joy surged in her chest. She wanted to shout in relief and celebration. She wanted to cry.

REBA CROSSED the stable yard to her new horse, Amber's, barn. Leaving the sunlight behind, Reba entered the barn, soaking up the sights and sounds and smells of horses. As a girl, she had been as horse-crazy as Becky was now.

Reba mused over the circumstances that had conspired to throw them together. She had never intended to seek out her child and break the agreement of confidentiality she had signed so long ago. And then at the stable two weeks ago there had been their incredible meeting, so much more wonderful than the fantasy reunions she'd imagined through the years. From the first day a close friendship had developed between them.

Reba could only speculate about Jason Kingsford. He never came to the stable, other than to drop Becky off. She knew only that he was rich and secure in Seattle's power structure as owner-editor of the *Examiner*, a newspaper held by

the Kingsford family for three generations.

"Hi, sweetie," Reba cooed as she entered Amber's stall. The Arabian mare swung her blazed face around in greeting. She began brushing the horse vigorously, taking pleasure in seeing Amber's coat gleam. Reba began humming contentedly.

She dropped the brush onto the wood-shaving bedding where it bounced beneath Amber's back hooves. As she knelt and reached to retrieve it, she saw a pair of lean, denim-clad legs enter the doorway of the stall.

"Hello in there." His deep voice seemed to vibrate off the walls and into her very being. "I wonder if I might speak with you?"

Reba's chin jerked up. From her crouched position halfway under her horse, she looked at the man in the doorway. Jason Kingsford. This man didn't look as though he spent much time hunched over typed pages. His rugged handsomeness suggested a love for the outdoors. His wind-tousled dark blond hair had the golden sheen of polished pine, as did the mustache above his firm unsmiling mouth. Reba rose stiff-leggedly.

"I'm looking for my daughter," he announced. Lines of tension radiated from the corners of his eyes. "I believe you know her... Becky Kingsford."

For a brief moment panic swept through Reba, rendering her speechless. How did he know about her? But of course, Becky must have mentioned something.

Noticing her confusion, he asked, "You are Reba, aren't you?"

"Yes, yes, I am," she said in a rush, then took a deep breath to get a grip on herself. "But I haven't seen Reba today. I recall her saying she would be at the horse show in the park, though. Have you looked there?"

"Not yet. I had hoped I would catch her here first. Look, I'm pretty sure if Becky is on the premises, she'll find her way to you."

Reba suffered a pang of guilt. "Why do you think she'd come see me?"

"Your horse here. Becky was after me to buy this mare for her."

She slipped the snaffle bridle on the mare. "I didn't know when I bought Amber that someone else was interested in her. If you still want her..." She let the sentence dangle.

"Very generous of you." A sharp-eyed intelligence radiated from Jason Kingsford as he assessed the situation. "If Becky does come around today, I'd like to hear about it." He withdrew a wallet from the back pocket of his snug-fitting jeans and slipped out

a business card. "You can reach me at this number."

Reba began buckling the bridle's neck strap. It was a true effort to look Jason Kingsford in the eye and oppose him. "I don't tattle on little girls to their fathers."

"Would you consent to passing on a message?" His eyes flashed. "Tell her that if she doesn't get home immediately, she'll be grounded until the moon turns blue." Without another word he turned on his heel and strode out of the stall.

An uncompromising, stubborn man. Just like her own father, Reba thought with anger welling.

Still fuming, Reba rode Amber onto the park's trails to the horse show grounds. She had completely cooled off by the time they emerged from the woods.

She was just kicking her feet out of the stirrups to stretch her legs when she saw Becky jogging toward her.

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming today," Becky said, beaming up at Reba.

"And I'm wondering why you're here at all," Reba rejoined, drinking in the sight of her daughter. "I met your father at the stable and got the distinct impression that you're supposed to be at home."

The spark in Becky's eyes extinguished, and her body slumped as

though her troubles weighed like pounds on her shoulders.

Reba felt she had to say something. "I hope you don't make a habit of going behind his back."

"If I had asked, he would have said no." Becky sighed, then cracked a brave smile. "My friend Heather is competing in the next class and I'd better go tell her I'm not going to be here to watch her after all." Disappointment fell on Becky's face again. "It's the last show of the season—but Dad doesn't care about that at all."

In an effort to brighten her daughter's day, Reba said, "I'll tell you what. Why don't you take Amber and ride over to find Heather?"

"Oh, could I?"

Reba waved her off, then leaned her elbows on the fence to watch the jumping.

JASE MADE his way to the bleachers. He saw Reba's gently curved figure.

"Well, hello again, Mr. Kingsford," she said in tight-lipped greeting. Her large dark brown eyes, which he'd found so disturbingly intense, impaled him once again.

He put out his hand. "Call me Jase," he corrected. He felt a strong need to erase her unpleasant first impression of him. Jase took a moment to study her face,

its boundaries softly blurred by a mass of dark curls. "I came on too strong in the barn," he said. "Becky's the one I'm angry with."

Reba curtly nodded.

Becky had mentioned her new friend Reba so often that she didn't seem like a stranger anymore. "She's on restriction," he said. "Or she was supposed to be."

Reba's eyes opened wide. On impulse, she touched his arm. "Could I ask just what crime Becky committed?" she asked.

His jaw seemed to firm by reflex. "She lied. I won't tolerate that."

Reba remembered the masthead of his newspaper. Truth Above All.

He continued, "So you see, it wasn't the streaking alone that concerned me—"

"What?"

"Streaking. Becky was having a slumber party. It seems they were daring each other to run across the road from her friend Heather's driveway to ours—stark naked. Becky's turn came just when a police car began its patrol. She got caught."

Reba snapped her mouth closed when she realized it had been gaping. "No wonder you were upset!"

"Actually, I was out that night. Becky lied to Ingrid, our housekeeper. She said she'd explained everything to me and that I didn't

want the subject brought up. I didn't find out until yesterday. I grounded her."

"Can you picture that ride in the patrol car? Oh, dear! I have a feeling you won't have to worry about it happening again." Unable to restrain herself, Reba began to laugh.

Jase felt some of his tension wash away. He liked Reba's laughter, as unforced and spontaneous as a child's.

His thoughts were punctuated by a bunch of firecrackers going off on the show grounds, causing a horse to shy and lunge sideways toward Reba. Jase yanked her to him and out of the way. As her breasts molded to his chest, his heartbeat accelerated.

Reba looked up into Jase's eyes. The liquid blue was warm and inviting.

Alarmed cries from across the arena drew his attention from her. A horse was rearing, its forelegs flailing the air.

Reba jumped up on the rail beside Jase, clutching his arm for balance. "Oh, my God, no!"

Without another word she leaped from the fence into the throng, pushing through the confused mass of people and animals. By the time Jase caught up to her, she was already on the ground, kneeling beside the still form of his daughter.

"YOUR COFFEE'S cold." Reba watched Jase wake with a start, prop himself up on the waiting-room couch and grope for the plastic cup on the table beside him. Bleary, he overshot his mark and sloshed the liquid onto his fingers.

"Damn!" He squinted at his watch, then at Reba, who now wore her nurse's uniform. "Good Lord, it's past three in the morning." The lines of fatigue etched around his eyes spoke of the toll worry had taken on him.

"There's no need for you to sit here all night," she said firmly. "Becky's going to be fine. Her concussion was mild. She's only staying overnight for observation."

He leaned forward and braced his elbows against his knees. "You don't know how scared I was. All I could think of was—" His voice cracked. "I thought..."

Reba sank down at his side. "I know," she whispered, longing to tell him she had felt the same fear, a parent's fear. But she dared not. If he knew who she was, he would surely forbid her to see Becky again. "Jase, why don't you go home and get some sleep?"

"Oh, hell, you're probably right. I'm not accomplishing anything here." He rotated his shoulders as if to rid them of kinks. "Except to age by the minute."

He set the coffee down and then, reaching for her hand, rose and gently pulled her up to stand beside him. Keenly aware of the sensations his warm, strong grip sent spiraling up her arm, she withdrew her hand with a jerky motion. "I'd better get back to work," she said, restoring an impersonal quality to her voice.

REBA STOOD behind the counter of the nurses' station, trying to suppress a yawn as she checked a patient's chart. These twelve-hour shifts were gruesome, especially on nights as grueling as this one had been.

She lifted her arms, trying to stretch the tightness out of her muscles. She leveled her gaze just as Jase approached. The instant their eyes met, her heart began to pound, and her knees seemed to lose their strength. *This is ridiculous!* she scolded herself. *Get hold of yourself, McCallister.* She braced her shoulders, collecting herself with an effort.

"Becky's being released this morning. I'm here to take her home."

"She doesn't even have a bruise," Reba remarked, thinking Jase would be pleased to hear that.

"Yes. She was damn lucky this time. I'm on the brink of forbidding her to go to the stables anymore," he said.

"But that fall was a fluke accident. There's a risk factor in every sport. Besides, Becky's a natural athlete." She leaned sideways. "Haven't you ever scared the life out of anyone?"

Jase couldn't seem to keep a quick smile from spreading across his face. "I even scared the life out of myself in a diving mishap in Puget Sound," he admitted.

"Aha!" Reba gave a knowing nod. "Scuba diving. Drownings. The bends." Her huge brown eyes sparkled. "Now, there are some injuries for you."

Jase smiled. "You've got me there."

Their laughter was cut short by a woman's cries. "No! Let me out of here! I have to see her!"

Reba jogged past the nurses' station and down the hallway to the room at the end.

Larry Howes, the new intern, stood over the examining table holding a compress against a young woman's head.

"I have to get out of here," the young woman cried. "I need to see my baby. I know she's hurt!"

Reba's stomach contracted at the woman's frantic pleas. She slid a quick glance to Larry, asking him with her eyes if the child was indeed injured.

Larry struggled to keep the compress in place. "The baby's fine," he assured both the patient

and Reba. "She's safe and sound in the next room. Your only problem is this scalp laceration. We have to get it sutured."

Reba placed a kind hand on the patient's shoulder. "We're going to get your baby." She spoke in a slow, repetitive tone as she looked into the young woman's glazed eyes. "Just as soon as you calm down, we're going to get your baby."

Her sobs lessened.

"You must be a calm mother so that you don't scare your baby. Now take a deep breath," Reba said. "Nice and slow."

The patient nodded, her gaze moving from Reba's face to fix on something behind her. Reba looked back over her shoulder, her eyes suddenly meeting Jase's.

She motioned toward the door with her head. "You'll have to leave," she ordered and turned back to the patient.

Jase was nowhere to be seen as she went to fetch the baby. Her fingers trembled when she held the warm pink bundle. A resurgence of something long-repressed swelled in Reba's heart, an ache painful and sweet. She carried the child to her waiting mother and helped the young woman hold her baby.

The mother looked up at Reba. "Thank you."

After a few minutes Reba carried the infant back to the bassi-

net. She turned away from the baby with a wrench that tore at her insides. A terrible sense of loss, loss of her own child, swept over her. She felt physically and mentally exhausted.

She headed for the nurses' station, struggling to pull herself together. Finally she leaned a shoulder against the cool plaster wall to rest for a moment. A hand touched the small of her back.

"You're exhausted," came Jase's familiar deep voice. Not giving her time to say a word, he circled her waist in a powerful embrace. He led her into a dark, empty side room. "I'm taking you from the battleground for a minute," he said.

When he eased her head to his shoulder, she suddenly began to cry. He held her close and stroked her hair. In the quiet darkness she forgot the outside world, the page of the intercom speaker in the hallway outside only the faintest reminder.

Finally Reba drew herself up, straightening her spine. "You must think I'm a complete idiot."

"I watched you with that patient. You're under tremendous stress on this job."

"Yes," Reba agreed, snatching up the ideal excuse. "It's been a long, hard night."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Quite." She turned toward the door.

He reached out to grasp her wrist. "Reba. I want to see you again. When is your day off?"

"Thursday," she murmured.

"It's a date, then?" When she hesitated, his thumb caressed the skin on the back of her hand, causing shivers to run up her arm. "Since you seem to want to be Becky's friend, I have a parental right to get to know you."

*

"No, NO, NO! Don't even think about it," Reba warned Bushka, who gazed up at her with soulful eyes and drooping tongue. She had enough on her mind without having her great yellow bush of a dog jump up and soil her outfit. She'd put a great deal of thought into choosing the pastel-pink sweater dress, hoping to present a sophisticated—but not provocative—image.

Her fear that her emotions would take control had almost caused her to make excuses when Jase had phoned the day before. When he'd heard the hesitation in her voice, he'd told her that he wanted her advice on handling Becky.

To keep her mind off Jase while she waited for him to arrive, Reba decided to add the newspaper photo of Becky to the others in her

meager collection. She placed the album on her lap. Though the other pictures had been taken twelve years before, the searing pain of loss she'd suffered then had not diminished.

Reba remembered the moment the nurse had carried Becky into her hospital room for the first time and said, "Here's your baby." Even then, underlying the giddiness, lurked fear for her little daughter's future.

Except for Birdie, the nurse who ran the maternity shelter where Reba stayed, no one visited her. She hadn't seen her boyfriend, Steven, for months. Her father had refused to acknowledge Becky. Keeping Becky meant striking out alone into the world—a feat that at barely sixteen she was entirely unprepared for. Nevertheless, she would have tried to make a go of it if Steven had been at her side. Sometimes she wondered what had become of him.

Reba wondered if Becky and Jase believed Becky had been deserted by an uncaring mother. If only she could explain that if she'd kept Becky, her father would not have allowed her to return home. She would have had to drop out of school, and would no doubt have ended up on welfare. Adoption was the only chance Becky had had for a better life.

She closed the album and put it away when she heard the sound of a car turning into the driveway. Her pulse leaped. Jase. Feeling much more eager than she had a right to feel, Reba snatched up her coat to meet him outside. When she closed the front door behind her, he was already out of his silver BMW. He looked casual and disturbingly handsome in slim-fitting jeans and a black windbreaker.

"You look wonderful." Jase opened the passenger door for her.

After settling her into the passenger seat, he went around to the driver's side. As he slid inside the car, he said, "I'm surprised you have a house instead of an apartment near the hospital."

"To tell you the truth, I wasn't too sure about renting a house. But Max insisted."

Jase's hand stalled on the ignition key.

"Max is my cat. I adopted him from a little girl who was standing in front of the grocery store with a whole box of kitties to give away."

Jase started the engine, the stiffness gone from his shoulders. "And the cat asked you to rent this house."

"Some cats go crazy if they're cooped up inside. Max shredded the curtains, used the planter as a litter box and tried to escape every time I opened the door. It came

down to either giving up him or the apartment."

Jase started down the hill. He glanced in her direction and grinned. Reba felt a tingly pleasure suffusing her from the ends of her toes to the tips of her ears. She turned her face toward her window, pretending to watch the world roll by. Her burgeoning feelings for him had shown.

They were passing affluent neighborhoods by the lake when he took a turn.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To my favorite restaurant." He grinned. "Do you know that according to some experts, a woman doesn't begin to fall in love with a man until he's fed her?"

By the time he'd finished the outrageous speech they'd turned through the open wrought-iron gates to the parking lot.

"Jase," Reba said, readying herself for a speech as he helped her from the car. Her back was to the door, and he didn't move aside but stood there blocking her passage. "We need to get something straight before we go in. I've got the impression you're looking for a more, ah, intense relationship than I am. I think that we should stick to building a friendship."

He leaned closer, unnerving her with his intense gaze on her mouth. His palm cupped her chin.

"Stop thinking, Reba. Just feel," he murmured, not giving her time to protest before he moved his mouth down to hers. Her bones felt liquid and her loins alive with fire.

Jase released her mouth and drew in a ragged breath. "I believe in total honesty in life. I have no intention of putting limitations on our relationship." They parted enough so that his blue eyes, dusky with desire, could look deeply into hers. "Now, do you still want to have lunch with me?"

She knew she should say no. She knew it, and yet his gaze had the effect of a brisk autumn wind, blowing her doubts and fears away.

"Just point me in the direction of the food," she said, her eyes glowing with wonderment.

He caressed her mouth with his one last time. "Come on," he said.

By the time Reba recovered her heart from her throat, they were in the restaurant. They'd been shown to a corner table, complete with an unobstructed view of the lake.

After Jase had placed their orders of broiled salmon, he asked Reba why she had chosen nursing as a career.

She placed a finger on her lips in thought. "The truth is I love to take care of people, to help them when they're in need."

"I've always believed nurses lack the wages and the respect they deserve."

Reba grinned and reached across the table to tap her wineglass against his. "I'll drink to that."

But Jase's curiosity about her work brought back memories of her past, and her smile faded. After she'd signed the adoption papers, she had gone back to live with her father until the end of high school, when she had left home. She'd refused his offers to help her, instead taking a job as an aide in a hospital school for severely handicapped children and working her way through college. Jase would never know how many nights during those years she'd cried herself to sleep from sheer exhaustion, how many times she'd wanted to quit. But she'd been driven to succeed by a desperate need to prove herself, to retrieve her pride, lost at sixteen.

Reba sat forward, propping her forearms on the table. "Did you always expect to run the newspaper?"

"I suppose I did," Jase said. "You see, my father was of the old school where children did as they were told and were expected to follow parental footsteps. When I was ten, I began writing for a column he invented just for me. It was called 'Kid's Korner' and ran every Saturday. Later I moved up to one

where I exposed political lies and that sort of thing. Exciting stuff for a kid still in college. The thrill of digging for the truth and making it known was indescribable."

Reba glanced downward. His passionate feelings about truthfulness reminded her that, no matter how their relationship developed, Jase might never forgive her for hiding her identity.

He leaned forward and pushed up his sleeve to reveal his arm. "See for yourself. Ink runs in these veins."

Reba believed his arm was the most sensually masculine one she had ever seen.

The return of the waitress with their meals put an abrupt end to the charged moment. They began to eat.

"Well, we do have something in common." Reba picked up the thread of conversation. "Our fathers both were the undisputed head of the household."

"Your father was like mine, then?"

"He was a good provider." Her expression grew pensive as she again recalled her teenage years. "After mother died, he was terrified that something would happen to me and became very overprotective. I was expected to stay at home and clean house and study hard like a good girl. I wasn't even allowed to go out on dates. And

there was no use arguing with him." She paused. "To lend some significance to a certain current situation...I began lying and sneaking out of the house."

"You lied to your father," he said with distaste.

She felt the fine hair on the back of her neck bristle. "Can't you see how overprotectiveness will cause rebellion?"

A taut moment passed as they eyed each other warily. It was Jase who broke the silence.

"I have the distinct feeling that the point of this entire conversation has been to lecture me on parenthood," he said in a crisp, cool tone. He crossed his arms.

Reba took a calming breath. "Jase, I've never forgiven my father for his lack of understanding. I can't bear the thought of that happening to you and Becky."

Jase also inhaled a deep breath. "I think you're making too much of this. Becky and I are very close."

"Will you still be close if you forbid her to go riding—you, the father who won't give up his own risky sports?" *There*, she thought, *let him try to get around that.*

"I don't think that's quite the same thing at all. Becky understands that. She'll soon forget all about this horse business."

"I disagree. You're underestimating the passion she has for the sport."

"Once I get her away from the stable, her interests will turn to something else."

"Becky is not like that." Reba's voice rose higher.

"I'm sure she'll feel just as deeply about which outfit to buy for school."

His patronizing smile caused exasperation to boil up within her. She whipped her linen napkin from her lap and slapped it down on the table. "I think it's time you took me home." Her heart throbbed like a demon in her breast. She realized that her unresolved anger at her father was at the root of her frustration with Jase, but that didn't help temper her feelings.

When the waitress arrived to try to tempt them with dessert, she and Jase turned surly looks toward her.

"No," they snapped in unison, sending the flustered woman off to retrieve their check.

Reba tried one last time. "I wish you'd consider again."

"And I wish you'd be a little more reasonable."

Reba rose, stiff-backed. She headed for the door without waiting for him.

EVEN THOUGH he didn't spare the horsepower, it took the better part

of an hour to get home, giving Reba a chance to cool down.

Jase came around to the passenger side to help her out. Dusk had fallen, shadows concealing them as he turned her into his arms so that his lean face was near, his eyes a blue force, inundating her.

"Come here," he ordered. He pulled her gently but firmly to him. The pressure of his lips on hers ebbed and flowed as his conquered, then released, in ever-mounting surges of energy. She knew she was making a big mistake. But it didn't matter. In that moment every cell of her body told her that this man was what she had always needed.

It was Jase who ended the embrace. He smiled down tenderly at her, as if their argument at the restaurant had never occurred. "Do you mind if I use your phone? Becky has been looking pale. I want to see how she's feeling."

"Of course."

They walked to the door arm-in-arm.

Jase stood his ground as they entered her home, staring in amazement as her giant dog, looking for all the world like a yellow grizzly, roared toward him.

"No, girl," Reba commanded her.

He let out a short laugh. "What kind of animal is this?"

"I'm not quite sure. She was a stray."

Jase bent down, holding his hand palm up so that the dog could give it a sniff.

The living room was simply furnished but cozy. A colorful patchwork quilt was folded in the corner of a comfortable-looking brown sofa. A pair of blue jogging shoes lay on the floor.

Jase spotted a phone on the wall near the kitchen and went over to use it.

After a few minutes, he hung up, watching Reba's graceful movements as she filled an automatic coffeemaker with water, then retrieved a handful of chocolate-chip cookies from a panda cookie jar. She set out a plate of them.

"Is Becky okay?" she asked.

"Mmm-hmm. She's fine." He bit into a fat cookie.

It was cool in the house, and Reba put a lighted long-stemmed match to crumpled newspaper beneath the kindling in the red-brick fireplace. Jase finished another cookie before joining her there.

"You're an expert fire starter," he said, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist the moment she rose to her feet. "You make me feel like bursting into flames." He leaned his cheek against her luxurious hair and slid his hands up to cup her firm breasts. Her body stiffened,

warning him he was pressing too hard, too fast.

"Reba," he said, his tone forceful, "I want to see you again. I can feel something wonderful happening between us."

"I'd like to see you again, too," she said, placing her hands on his chest, pushing him away. "As soon as Becky is off restriction, we can all go riding together."

"Forget that," he said brusquely, folding her into his embrace again. Her smile faded.

Moments later he stood on the front porch. In his left hand he clutched a brown bag containing a half dozen cookies, and in his right he held a plastic cup of steaming coffee, complete with cream.

*

REBA SANK into a sullen slump on her sofa and stared at the jack-o'-lantern on the counter. The next weekend was Halloween. The house she'd always thought of as a pleasant oasis in a sometimes difficult world now offered her no comfort. She pulled the crazy quilt over her stockinged feet and stared at what was left of the fire. The flames curled around the charred wood. Jase had liked the fire she'd built, she recalled, the thought of him causing stirrings in the pit of her stomach.

Reba sat up with a start when the phone rang. She jumped up to

answer it, glad of the distraction. When she heard the sound of Jase's deep voice, she nearly dropped the receiver.

His chuckles rumbled through the line. "You sound surprised."

"I guess I am," she admitted.

"Are you busy tomorrow?"

Cautiously Reba answered, "Not very. Why?"

"I'd like you to meet Becky and me at the stable."

Reba restrained herself from letting out a whoop of joy. The whole world had changed.

REBA WAS a half hour late. Her Volkswagen bug had decided to sleep in that morning. She had been forced to ask a neighbor to help her jump-start it. But neither her broken-down car nor the damp Seattle weather that frizzed her hair could temper Reba's enthusiasm this afternoon.

She headed eagerly into the arena. Inside, her gaze riveted on Jase, and her heart began flip-flopping.

He was holding the reins of a saddled horse, an obese dapple gray, that Reba had seen a few times plodding along the trails.

Jase's gaze devoured her, and she stared back at him with an unmistakable glow of her own. Reba was glad when Becky bounded out from behind the horse to interrupt the intimate exchange.

"Reba! I thought you'd never get here," she said, bouncing from one foot to the other like an over-excited puppy. "You'll never guess what Dad is going to do."

Reba flicked a questioning look to Jase.

Laughter spilled from Becky. "He's buying me a horse!" She patted the gray with enthusiasm.

"It's true," Jase said, his eyes continuing to smile at Reba although his voice had become serious. "I thought about what you said." He glanced down at Becky, who beamed up adoringly at him. Reba knew her own gaze was similar, and she couldn't help it.

She gave the ancient specimen of horseflesh a critical once-over. This wasn't the type of horse an experienced rider such as Becky would be happy with for long, regardless of her jubilant spirits at the moment.

Suddenly an idea came to her mind. Her eyes flashed with excitement. "Jase, I have a wonderful solution."

He rubbed a knuckle against his dark blond mustache. "I wasn't aware there was a problem."

"Well, there is. And it's a major one. This horse is broken-down," Reba said in a soft voice. "Becky's going to want to jump, to ride in competitions like her friends do. This old beast won't be able to stand that pace." Sensing

Jase was on the point of making a decision, she continued. "I think the answer is for you to buy Amber from me." Two sets of surprised eyes stared at her. She rushed on. "You see, I bought Amber on impulse. I desperately need a new car, but I'll never be able to afford one as long as I'm paying for boarding."

"But, Reba," Becky said, confusion and gratitude mixing in her voice, "you won't have a horse to ride."

"I can rent the stable's school horses to take out on the trails."

"All right," Jase said between clenched teeth. "Go get the mare and we'll have a look."

With a shout and a jump, Becky raced out of the arena to fetch Amber.

"I've missed you," Jase said, the deep timbre of his voice underlining the sincerity of those simple words. "More than I ever thought I would."

Reba inhaled a shaky breath, and smiled up at him, her dark eyes filled with joy.

He brushed a strand of brown hair from her forehead, as though he couldn't resist making some physical contact with her. "I've needed someone like you to shake me up a bit."

Reba laughed. "You haven't failed me yet."

Becky had entered the arena on Amber. The purebred lines of the mare and the delicately built girl were in perfect proportion, and the horse responded to every cue Becky gave her. Jase watched as Becky put the mare through her paces.

Afterward he stroked his mustache for dramatic effect. "I've decided to buy this mare."

Becky scrambled down from the saddle and threw herself into her father's arms. Warmth surged up from Reba's heart at the touching scene.

Becky released her father's waist and remounted. She rode off to display Amber to her friends.

Alone again, Jase wrapped an arm around Reba's waist and drew her close. His eyes held a seductive gleam. "To get even with you for badgering me into that, I'd like to see you this coming week. We'll car shop. I want you to come to my house next weekend for Halloween night, too. Becky's going to an overnight party, so we'll have the haunted mansion to ourselves."

Reba shivered excitedly at the implications of that. She smiled up at him, her surrender visible in her eyes.

NERVOUS anticipation knotted Reba's stomach as she parked her new white Mustang in the Kingsford driveway. The past week had

been wonderful. She'd ridden with Becky, gone shopping with Jase for her new car and shared an expedition with father and daughter for Becky's new riding boots. Now, as she walked toward the beautiful traditional home, with its gnarled old wisteria vine twisting over the front entry and jack-o'-lanterns guarding the door, she felt excitement race through her.

She had just raised her hand to ring the bell when one of the double doors flew open.

"Reba," Jase called out.

With her first glimpse of his smiling face, Reba's blood began to pound in her ears. As soon as the door closed behind them, Jase hauled Reba into his arms. His gaze bore into hers with an intimacy that took her breath away.

Feeling love-dazed, Reba let Jase lead her down the central hallway into a large kitchen with adjoining family room where a massive river-rock fireplace contained a bright fire. "I thought we'd have dinner here," he said, indicating a table set for two in front of the roaring blaze. "We haven't used the formal dining room since we moved in. I'm hoping you'll help Becky and me bring the room alive for Thanksgiving."

As much as she longed to be included in the Kingsford family, she knew she'd better slow down on making plans with Jase. "I'd like

to, but I always visit my father." She turned away from his perceptive gaze.

Without warning, he drew her to him, his expression serious. "There is something mysterious about you. Do you have a deep dark secret, Reba McCallister?"

She suppressed the guilt that throbbed in her breast. "Yes," she said, making a valiant effort to smile. "The secret is that I'm starved." With great effort she withdrew from him.

The meal was delicious. The abalone, he'd told her over dinner, was the last of his limited supply, another triumph as the result of his dare-devil sporting life.

Glancing around the richly paneled family room, she noticed a collage of snapshots of Becky. "Were you the photographer?" she asked.

He smiled as he studied the pictures. "I was one of those dads who, right from the start, had to have a memory of every moment of his child's life." He glanced at Reba. "Carolyn and I had wanted a child for a long time. When she couldn't have children, we immediately decided to adopt. It took a long time, but finally there was a child. The mother had asked that the baby keep her given name, Rebecca Marie. I'll never forget the first moment I saw my beautiful little girl. I lost my heart."

"With your coloring so much the same, you could have easily passed her off as your own."

"She is my own," he said. "I've always emphasized that she was meant to be a Kingsford, and that I'm proud to be her father."

Reba rose from her chair a little unsteadily and began gathering up the dishes. Jase was at once by her side, halting her hand with his. He bent to tease her ear with tiny kisses. "My guests aren't required to do the washing up. How about a tour of the house?"

His eyes were warm on Reba's face as he led her out of the room and up the winding staircase.

Becky's room was a delight. Reba turned in a circle to take it all in, wanting to commit every inch of the room to memory. She saw on the nightstand a silver-framed portrait. In it an attractive woman smiled up at her.

"Is this Carolyn?"

He nodded. "That photo was taken only a few weeks before the accident." He glanced away, his forehead creased. "Carolyn's family owns a horse farm in Virginia," he explained. "She was killed during a hunt when her horse missed a jump and threw her."

"Oh, Jase. I had no idea. No wonder you were so concerned about Becky's riding."

"You were absolutely right. There's risk inherent in almost every sport. By making an issue out of her riding, I caused her to focus more on her mother's death." He paused, rubbing his mustache thoughtfully. "The tension between us is gone, and I haven't heard a fib all week."

Jase reached over to trail a light touch down her arm. She averted her eyes, fearing they would reveal all: her blatant desire, her need to love, her secrets.

Taking her elbow, he escorted her down the hallway and into a study. Reba's gaze flicked to an antique trunk pushed up against one side of the desk. A swatch of glittery red fabric dangled out.

Jase reached down and opened the lid. A tangle of colorful clothes filled the box. "Becky dragged the old family costume box out of the attic and was trying to get my opinion of what she should wear to Heather's costume party tonight." He glanced at her, amused. "She settled on mud-splattered riding boots and goggles."

"What?"

"She went as a jockey."

Reba laughed, rolling her eyes heavenward. She picked up the red fabric spilling out of the trunk. It was a flamboyant gypsy skirt. She held it against her waist. "Look at this!" She held up a scoop-necked

satin blouse. "I've found the rest of the outfit."

"Try it on. I'd like to see you as a gypsy. You'll be perfect with your dark hair and eyes."

Jase showed her to the master bedroom and left her there to change. Reba donned the outfit.

At her signal Jase entered the room. She burst into laughter at the sight of him.

He swaggered over to her, in baggy shirt and ragged pantaloons. He'd tied a red handkerchief around his head and wore a black patch over one eye. "Come here, my pretty. This pirate has plans for ye."

His mouth descended upon hers. But Reba made no struggle. Instead, she arched unprotestingly against his body. He probed her mouth with his tongue, plundering every space within. His kiss awakened fully the aching desire she'd so long suppressed.

He lowered his lips to her throat. "I'm going to make love to you."

It was a statement, quiet and true. Deep within her female center, passion like a hot spring burst forth, washing away the last of her caution.

The next thing Reba knew, she was lying back on the bed with Jase moving his hands along the curves of her body as if he knew them well from having made love to her a thousand times before. She

writhed and heard herself making small sounds, half cries, as her desire grew.

"Sweet Reba," he said. "I've been crazy with wanting you."

He left the bed to remove his clothes, tossing them onto the floor in his haste. Reba's followed.

"You're a picture," he said, at last joining her on the bed. "I'm in love," he said softly.

And I. Her heart pounded out the beat of the words. *In love. In love.* She reached for his body, touching him intimately.

He groaned with pleasure and settled himself between her thighs. The fit was so right. He entered her with the smooth power of a breaking wave. Her body seemed to take on a life of its own, arching in Jase's every thrust in uninhibited response. They were caught up in a storm wave that crested endlessly, finally breaking with shattering force, and she was filled, completed, made whole.

For a long time they lay spent, hot, moist bodies entwined, lovers washed up together, basking on a warm, peaceful shore. Finally Reba drew in a shivery, disbelieving breath and opened her eyes. Not quite ready to let reality invade her bliss, she let her eyelids drift closed again and nestled her head into the curve of Jase's broad shoulder.

He traced a finger gently across her mouth. "You're not drifting away from me, are you?" he asked, then pulled her closer to him as if assuring his possession.

She smiled, but her eyelids were too heavy to open.

"Now that I've got you in my clutches, I don't intend to let you escape."

REBA WOKE and drew in a sleepy breath, her first conscious perception the musky scent of Jase's chest beneath her cheek. When she leaned over and kissed him, he moaned, a low guttural sound that sent tingles rippling through her.

All around them milky morning light coated the room, obscuring sharp angles and muting colors. He stared deeply into her eyes with a gaze so fiercely loving it took her breath away.

The instant he entered her, she lost herself in the sensation of being joined to him. It was such excruciating sweetness that everything else was closed out of her world.

But later, when Reba awoke for the second time that morning, her old fears returned. As time passed, she wouldn't be able to hide her falseness; of that she was certain. She was utterly, foolishly in love with Jase Kingsford.

She feared her heart would pay the consequences.

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DURING THE following few weeks Jase seemed ever-present in her life; whenever he couldn't be with her, he kept her company in her thoughts. Her emotions seesawed from euphoria to despair, her heart and conscience at war.

She wished she could be open with Jase. If he loved her, he might understand and forgive her. But did he love her? Until she knew for sure, she must keep silent. She would wait until Christmas, she decided. Surely, if he hadn't fallen in love with her by then, he never would.

JASE ASSISTED her into the Bronco. They were going to pick Becky up at the stable.

"I've been trying to figure out how to handle something with Becky," Jase said suddenly as they pulled away.

"I thought something was bothering you."

"It is," he admitted. "Last night when we were watching a special about the problem of teen pregnancies, she became moody. Apparently most girls keep their babies these days. Some schools even have nurseries. She hated the thought that her birth parents didn't want her."

"Didn't want her?" The words burst out of Reba. She was shak-

ing. "Is that what you believe, too?" she asked.

Jase switched the heater to high. "I like to *think* they wanted her," he said slowly. "Of course Becky's been told a hundred times that her mother probably sacrificed her own feelings to give her child a chance for a better life."

She glanced over at Jase's finely sculpted profile and wished she felt sure enough of his love to confide in him now. She thought about Christmas, only four weeks away. But, oh, the waiting was so hard.

The stable parking lot was nearly deserted when they arrived. In the freezing rain Reba ran behind Jase to Amber's barn. They got there just in time to see Becky, dripping sponge in hand, chasing Heather down the center of the long aisle. The girls raced to the far end and back again.

A screech caught Reba's attention. Staggering, Becky plopped down on a nearby tack trunk. Heather's eyes were bright from the fun and her cheeks a healthy rose pink. Becky, on the other hand, had gone from flushed to deathly pale. She leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, swaying. Shooting a concerned glance at Jase, Reba went over to crouch at Becky's feet. She pushed back the thick blond hair. "Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"I feel funny." Sweat trickled down Becky's cheeks. "I'm dizzy."

Just as Reba stood to beckon Jase, Becky muttered something unintelligible and toppled forward.

THE DOCTOR gestured toward the couch and then sat down across from Jase and Reba. "I'm not sure of the cause yet, but Becky's blood-sugar level and other symptoms indicate organic hypoglycemia."

"Hypoglycemia? You mean low blood sugar?"

"Exactly."

"Is it serious?" Jase asked.

"Fortunately hypoglycemia is fixable. But first we have to figure out what's causing it." He frowned. "As I recall, Becky's genetic history is not complete. Is there any way you could get more information on the birth parents?"

Reba went numb with fear.

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JASE ARRIVED at a quarter to six to take Reba to dinner, to celebrate Becky's recovery. With frequent, high-protein meals, she'd probably live longer than most people.

As they drove across the bridge, the car phone beeped. It was Jase's answering service saying that Birdie Pennington had returned his

call. It would be all right if he wished to see her this evening.

Reba listened to the message, stunned. Her thoughts were in such disarray she barely heard the operator giving Jase the address.

Jase replaced the receiver with a triumphant smile. "This is a real breakthrough. Birdie Pennington is the woman who runs the residential shelter where Becky's mother stayed. It's practically on our way. You can go with me." Jase, in his enthusiasm, didn't notice the trauma his words were causing Reba. "You know," he said, "it really took some work to get the name of this shelter, The Sunshine Home, out of the adoption agency."

"But there is no medical emergency anymore," she said, keeping the desperation she felt from her voice.

"I'm not waiting until there is one. This situation has just pointed out the need to get complete medical records for Becky."

Reba stared blankly at the street. Everything, including Jase's voice, seemed far away. She pressed her fingers to her forehead.

"Are you all right?"

"No," she blurted out. "I have a headache suddenly." They were exactly five minutes away from Birdie's home. Apprehension churned her stomach. "Jase!" She practically shouted out his name.

"I have to get out. Please pull over."

He halted the car sharply. "What on earth!"

"I'm sorry. This headache is making me feel ill." The corner building across from them contained a bar and grill that had seen better days. Reba nodded to it and spoke urgently. "Let's go in there for a minute. If I get some food, I'll feel better."

Puzzlement flashed across his face. "This is not the kind of restaurant I had in mind for a celebratory dinner. However, I wouldn't want to be accused of denying a starving woman a burger and fries."

Reba suppressed a sigh of relief. "I'll make it up to you." This time her smile was genuine.

No matter the ragtag appearance of the place from the outside, the crowd inside spoke of its popularity. They grabbed a pub table and placed their order. Looking around, Reba spotted the phone sign that pointed down the rest room hallway. It was a chance.

"Excuse me. I'm just going to go wash my hands." She rose, a bit unsteadily. It was imperative that she contact Birdie, tell her to *please* pretend not to know her.

REBA HAD forgotten how short Birdie was, like a plump little quail hen. Her sharp black eyes darted

from Jase to Reba, where they lingered a fraction too long.

All at once the small woman sprang into action. "You must be Mr. Kingsford," she said.

Jase nodded and placed a hand on the small of Reba's back, pressing her forward. "And this is Reba McCallister."

Birdie showed no reaction to hearing Reba's name. They entered a dark mahogany-paneled vestibule. Birdie gestured toward the first room to the left. "Let's go into my office."

Birdie's office was more utilitarian than ever, Reba noted. Always short of funds, Birdie spent the money on her girls, not on decor.

Jase leaned forward when he sat down, clasping his hands. "As I explained on the phone earlier, I'm here about my daughter, whose mother stayed here more than twelve years ago." He paused. "This past week I was confronted with the possibility that Becky's medical records might be essential. To tell you the truth, at this point I would like to know who her parents are."

Birdie looked flustered. "I will tell you straight off that I will not break my vow of confidentiality."

Jase placed his hands flat on Birdie's desk. "Surely for the sake of a child you can bend your rules."

Birdie's black eyes flashed back at him. "It may not be possible to have what you want, Mr. Kingsford. After you called, I went through your daughter's records. Her mother listed no genetic illnesses. We don't have any information on Becky's male parent."

"In that case, the mother should be appealed to for his identity."

A silence fell upon the three of them. Then Birdie opened a desk drawer and handed Jase a form. "Fill this out and I'll see what I can do," she said, not unkindly.

When they returned to the car, Reba fell, emotionally exhausted, into the seat. She offered Birdie a silent thank-you for not exposing her. She'd been given only a reprieve, though. Reba knew Jase would not give up until he had what he wanted.

BIRDIE POURED Earl Grey into a bone china cup and handed it to Reba. Poignant memories surfaced of the last time Birdie had invited Reba in for a private conversation. They had talked of Reba's future: her return home, her thoughts of becoming a nurse, her giving up Becky. She'd been helped by Birdie's sympathetic heart and clear head, Reba recalled. And she had returned, Reba realized, not only to deliver a letter, but also to seek guidance once again.

As Reba began to talk, Birdie listened with an air of intense concentration. She didn't judge others; she only tried to help them with their problems. By the time Reba had explained hers, Birdie was nodding as though she'd already arrived at an answer.

"There's only one thing for you to do," Birdie knitted her fingers together in a determined fashion. "You must tell him the truth."

Reba pressed her knuckles to her head. "He'll think I just want to be with Becky."

"If he can't see how much you love him, he's one foolish man."

"I'll have a better chance of winning him over if I hold off my confession for a while."

Lines of worry appeared on Birdie's brow for the first time. "You'd better be honest with him before he learns the truth on his own. It would be impossible for him to understand and to forgive that way."

Reba's fingers were trembling as she unsnapped her leather purse and drew out the five typed pages. "I stayed up half the night writing this letter. It's anonymous ... from Becky's mother. I've given all the medical information about my relatives that I know, and I've promised to try to locate Becky's father." Reba drew in a long breath and handed it over. "I included a couple of pages just for

Becky, too. It's about the circumstances of her birth and how bad I felt about having to give her up."

"Do you know where Becky's father is, then?"

"I have no idea." She rose to go, giving Birdie a hug. "I just pray I'll find him before Jase does."

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"HOW LONG will you be with your father for Thanksgiving?" Jase asked.

"A couple of hours, I guess," Reba answered, pulling at the phone cord.

"Why don't you drop over here afterward?"

"I wish I could." She paused, searching for words. "The truth is, seeing Dad can be a strain. I don't know what kind of shape I'll be in when I get home."

"You two still don't get along?"

"I told you before what my dad is like." Her tone was abrupt.

He lowered his voice. "Reba, listen. I don't know what happened between you two, but I'm sure your father was doing the best he could at the time. You might be a little more compassionate—"

"Good advice, Mr. Kingsford." Her sarcasm canceled her praise.

"Why don't you make up with him? Why don't you ask for *his* forgiveness?"

"Honestly, Jase—"

"And that's another thing. Try honesty. Tell him how you really feel."

"I'm late. Goodbye, Jase."

The sound of the dial tone whined in his ear.

SHE MANAGED to get through Thanksgiving dinner without uttering a single sharp word to her father, although at times he tempted her. After dinner her father had retired to the living room to watch a game, as though she wasn't in the house.

Reba took the back stairs up to her old bedroom. Everything was just as she'd left it—faded yellow spread on a single bed, complete Black Stallion series in the low case beneath the dormer window, battered window desk. She walked over to the desk. The surface was dusted. It was the first time she'd realized that her father kept the room clean. It astounded her. She concentrated on pawing through the mess in the desk drawer, finding high-school papers, old magazines, letters, but nothing from Steven. He'd never written her. Shoving everything back into the desk, she slammed the drawer shut. A sound startled her, and she swung around to see her father walking in with two cups of coffee.

"How thoughtful," she said.

"You didn't make any," he answered, his voice gruff. Instead of leaving, he sat on the edge of her bed and stared out the dark window. "I heard you up here making all kinds of noise," he said.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you," she said coolly.

"Nah. I just came up to see what you were doing."

She heard the loneliness in his voice and scolded herself for answering him so frostily.

"I was just going through some of my old papers," she said, crossing the room and perching on the other end of the bed. Reba was wondering how to proceed when Jase's suggestion flashed into her thoughts. *Try honesty.*

"There's something we should talk about," she said, speaking quickly before she lost her courage. "Have you ever wondered what it was like for me when I left here? When I was pregnant?"

His eyes widened. "I've thought about it. You never brought it up."

"I am now." Her fingers clamped viselike around her coffee mug. "It was very hard for me. I wanted to keep the baby, you know." She didn't hide the bitterness in her voice. "I wanted so much to be independent and take care of my child."

He frowned and spoke painfully, as if he were dragging the words from his heart. "I guess you

got that from me. The independent streak. The false pride."

She studied him, his muscular arms folded across his chest. His chin wasn't as square as she remembered it. The edges had been softened by time.

"There's no changing the past," he said. "I might want to do it, but there's no way I can."

She knew that was as much of an apology as she would probably ever get from him. "I'm sorry, too, Dad," she said. "For being so angry with you all this time. I hurt inside and I blamed you for it."

There, she'd said it. Amazingly, a sense of well-being came over her.

"That's all over and done with," he said.

"Not anymore." She looked into his remorseful eyes. "I've found Becky again."

When his shocked expression faded, wonder filled his face. "Where? How?"

"It was a miracle," she said, overcome by his display of feeling. Suddenly Reba found herself eager to tell him the whole story. She began with her accidental discovery of Becky and ended with the reason for searching her desk.

The silver-haired man sat absorbing all he'd heard. Reba felt like a teenager all over again, wondering if he was going to disapprove of her actions.

He rose to his feet, took an awkward step closer and opened his arms to receive her.

"Oh, Daddy, thank you so much," she murmured, hugging him close.

He pulled away. "That Hjortland boy. I know where he might be. He came by once when you were still at that there girls' home. Said he was heading up to Alaska to fish with his uncle and you could reach him there. I told him you'd decided to put the baby up for adoption. He seemed relieved."

"You never mentioned any of this before."

"He was heading out. I thought it would upset you."

Reba heard the worry in his voice.

"You might call Dutch Harbor information," he suggested. "Maybe he's still up there."

"You don't know how much this means to me," Reba said.

"I think I do." He cleared his throat. "I'd like to see her—ah, Becky. You don't happen to have a picture?"

Reba smiled, so full of joy she could barely contain herself. "She looks just like Mom."

When they returned downstairs, Reba served pumpkin pie, and they ended up talking for two more hours.

It had been an amazing day.

THE NEXT MORNING Jase arrived at Reba's door at nine o'clock. Reba let him in, clutching her maroon velvet bathrobe below her breasts.

Jase cupped her face and captured her mouth, kissing her urgently.

"I desperately need a cup of coffee."

Reba laughed and busied herself pouring coffee into her mugs. She handed him a cup.

"So you had dinner with your father and lived to tell the tale," Jase explored.

She brought her cup of steaming black coffee to her lips and blew ripples across the surface. "It went well—no, it was fantastic. He opened up. I never thought we could be friends again."

"Is everything cleared up?"

"It'll take a while, I think. But we made a breakthrough last night. I'm never going to let us go back to the way we were before." She gazed at him with her soft mouth curved into a pleased smile. "It was mostly your doing," she said. "I wouldn't have swallowed my tender pride and made the first overtures if you hadn't kept harping at me."

Jase drew back. "Harping? Is that what I do?"

"Let me phrase it this way. Sometimes you don't know when to quit."

"An admirable quality, one which has proven its worth many times." Jase grinned. "Most recently with Birdie Pennington."

"What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Pennington contacted Becky's mother. The woman immediately wrote a long letter and hand-delivered it to Birdie. She called me right away, and I went over to pick it up." Jase ran a hand through his hair. "It was an incredible letter, Reba. Not only did she outline her family's medical history, she included a letter to Becky. It was as though the woman knew how much Becky needed reassuring."

"So you let Becky read it?" Reba asked in a breathy voice, her eyes even darker and brighter than before.

"Becky was overcome," he said softly. "The letter proved her natural mother had wanted her, and still loved her even to this day. It was a catharsis for her."

"You look relieved, too."

Jase nodded. "The woman said she'd locate Becky's father."

Reba rose and went quickly to rinse their cups in the sink. Jase came up behind her, turning her to face him. "Let's forget about all that and just enjoy ourselves. You have to know I've fallen in love with you," he said quietly.

In her joy at hearing his words of love, she suppressed her fear of

how he would react when he learned that it was not luck that had brought her into his life.

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REBA STARED down at the slip of paper on which she had written the number the Dutch Harbor operator had given her. No one had answered when she'd tried calling before. Her stomach contracted from nervous anticipation.

She let the phone ring for several minutes and was about to hang up when a man's voice answered.

"Hello," Reba said. "This is an old friend of Steven Hjortland. Could I speak to him?"

"Wait a minute," the man told her.

"Hello?" came another voice.

Reba swallowed the lump in her throat. "Steven? Is this Steven Hjortland from Seattle?"

"Who is this?" he demanded.

"Steven, this is Reba. Reba McCallister."

There was a long stunned silence. "Reba," he said in a quieter tone. "Where are you?"

"In Seattle. I know it's a shock to hear from me like this, but something important has come up. It's about our child. Our daughter."

There was another pause. His tone was gruff when he spoke again. "This is a bad time. My wife is cooking dinner. Listen. Can

this wait until next week? I'm coming down to Seattle on Friday. Can we meet somewhere?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. I'm a nurse at Eastside General. I get off duty at five. How about if we get together in the hospital cafeteria?" She hesitated before speaking again. "It's good to hear your voice, Steven."

"I'll see you on Friday."

IT HAD BEEN a hectic five days. She'd be glad to have this meeting over with. She was getting tired of answering Jase's questions with lies; all she wanted was for this matter to be finished.

At the cafeteria entrance Reba spotted Steven easily. He sat at a table in the center of the room sipping coffee. When Reba approached, his gray eyes fastened on her.

She held out her hand, feeling awkward and uncertain. "Thanks for coming," she said.

He motioned for her to sit across from him. Reba had wondered if she would feel any emotion toward him after all these years, but she wasn't surprised when none surfaced. Theirs had been a fleeting teenage romance.

"You said there was something about the baby," he began. His coarse hands, resting on the table, were clenched almost into fists. "All these years I'd wanted to tell

you what a stupid kid I was runnin' off like that. I wanted to tell you how sorry—"

"No. Stop it," Reba broke in. "I didn't look you up for some late-date apology. I don't blame you for anything, Steven."

He regarded her intently. "I never told my wife, Pam, about the baby. Then I got to thinking about it and decided to tell her everything before I came down here. She's a good woman. There shouldn't be secrets between us." He gave a rueful snort. "She was more jealous of me seeing you again."

For a few minutes they shared details of their lives. Steven was making a good living in the commercial fishing business. Reba congratulated him, pleased that he was doing so well. Becky would be proud of him, she mused. Taking out her wallet, Reba handed him a photograph. "This is your daughter, Becky."

He studied the picture for a long time. "She don't look anything like me."

"She took after my mother," Reba explained. "That's how I happened to find her. Her photograph was in the gossip section of a local paper. When I saw it, I just knew it was her. She even has a brown spot in her eye, just like my mom did. Her adoptive parents

kept her given name, as I had requested."

"Who adopted her?" he asked.

Reba hesitated, then decided it wouldn't be fair not to tell him. "The Kingsfords. You know, the newspaper people."

He let out a low whistle. "The kid's got it made."

"She does have a good life. Her father loves her." Reba continued to tell him all she knew about Becky, concluding with her latest trip to the hospital. "Mr. Kingsford still thinks it would be a good idea to know her complete family history." She placed a form on the table. "If you could just fill this out, it would be a great help."

Steven was glancing over the papers when Reba sensed someone's approach and looked over her shoulder. *Jase*. He exchanged curious looks with Steven before turning his attention to her.

"They told me I might find you in the cafeteria," he said.

She saw his gaze sweep across the table, his eyes widening when he saw Becky's picture lying there next to the medical history form. He bent slightly, scanning the paper.

Steven rose slowly to his feet. She watched in frozen horror as he offered his hand to Jase.

"Steven Hjortland, old friend of Reba's."

Jase returned the handshake.

"Jase Kingsford."

"Hey, man, it's good to meet you." Steven grinned, pumping Jase's arm. "Reba's just told me about you. I'm Becky's father."

Jase's hand fell away from Steven's, his intense blue gaze on Reba. "What's this all about?" he asked her with deathly calm.

Reba gripped the back of her chair to steady herself, her knees as trembly as soft pudding. As stunned as she was, some part of her mind continued to function with an odd clarity. Pulling herself together, she addressed Steven. "Would you mind leaving us? I'll call later." Her hands began to shake. "This is a personal matter between Jase and me."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. Yes. Just go."

He remained poised like an uncertain grizzly bear for a moment and then slowly shoved the picture of Becky into the pocket of his parka and walked out of the cafeteria.

Jase stepped in front of her, his blue eyes fierce. "You'd better start talking before I shake the truth from you."

His fingers bit into her flesh like the iron teeth of a trap.

"Steven Hjortland is Becky's father," she began, foregoing the careful speech she'd planned.

Pausing only a moment, she added, "I am her mother."

Her announcement blasted the air. Neither of them moved or spoke for a long moment.

"When Hjortland said...I knew then..." He shook his head, his anger replaced with raw pain.

Her own fire sputtered out, and her voice was dull as she continued. "I didn't want you to find out this way."

"Becky's mother." Jase closed his eyes and sucked in a tormented breath. His hand loosened its grip on her arm and fell like a dead thing to his side.

She tentatively reached for his hand, but he withdrew as though her touch might be painful and averted his gaze as though he couldn't bear the sight of her. "Try to understand," she said in desperation.

He turned and walked to the cafeteria door without looking back.

THE NEXT DAY Reba phoned Steven. He was sorry for having ruined things for her. She assured him it wasn't his fault. When he said he'd like to see Becky in person someday, Reba could only tell him that she'd relay his request to Jase. He ended their conversation by wishing her all the best.

For the following ten days Reba waited anxiously for any word

from Jase, but he made no attempt to contact her. The only things that kept her from the depths of depression were her work and the time she'd been spending at The Sunshine Home, helping out Birdie.

Perhaps it wasn't too late to soothe some of the pain she'd inflicted on the man she so desperately loved, she thought. She must tell Becky the truth, too. Then for once in her life Reba would harbour no secrets.

Before she had time to get cold feet, Reba hurried to the phone.

"I'm surprised you have the nerve to call," Jase said when he heard her voice.

"I want to explain—"

"What?" he interrupted. "Your lies?"

"Just give me a chance," Reba persisted. "You deserve to know everything...and I deserve the opportunity to tell you." She let a weighty pause hang between them. "And Becky deserves to know the truth."

"It would be a shock for her."

"Not so much as it was for you," Reba said quietly. "I'll have a chance to start from the beginning. It won't just be dumped on her."

"I'd like to finish this business as quickly as possible."

Reba ignored the finality of his voice and concentrated instead on

the miracle of receiving another chance. "I'll be there early, before I go to work," she said, and prayed her nerve wouldn't fail her.

PRESSING HER photograph album to her breast, she inhaled deeply to calm herself.

"Becky's waiting for you." Jase pulled back his broad shoulders as though fortifying his defenses against her. "She's up in her room," he said tersely as he crossed to the stairs.

Reba walked slowly behind him. Everywhere festive spirit was in evidence; "White Christmas" coming from the radio, the sparkling lush silver garlands twined around the mahogany banister.

"Reba!" Becky shouted when they entered her room. "Where have you been?" Becky demanded. "Every day I go to the stables and you're never there."

As Reba sat on the bed, she noticed that on the wall beside them a picture of a teenage movie star had been tacked up among the horse posters. "I haven't been going to the stables lately. How's Amber?"

Becky sat up. "She's wonderful. I've begun to take dressage lessons, and Amber's being trained in that, too." Becky continued to chatter about Amber's endless intelligence and ability.

Next to the girl lay a pile of teen magazines. At first Reba was surprised that Becky wasn't reading a horse book, then she noticed again the new picture on the wall.

"You're growing up so fast," Reba mused out loud. "Pretty soon you'll forget about horses altogether."

"Never!" Becky declared.

Jase moved restlessly, prompting Reba to take a deep breath and begin. "I didn't come here today to talk about riding. I have something important to tell you. It's about you and me," Reba said. She proceeded to give a detailed account of her early life, telling about her pregnancy, the baby, how hard it had been to give up the child she loved.

Becky listened silently and stared at the album Reba placed in front of her.

"Here are some pictures of me at a maternity home—" Reba paused and took a deep breath "—along with some pictures of you as a baby. Becky, I'm your real mother."

Becky blinked, and the color seemed to drain from her face.

Reba carried on in a voice that was much calmer than she actually felt. "There's a photo of your natural father, Steven, too. He lives in Alaska now. He said he'd really like to see you someday."

Becky looked to Jase for confirmation.

"It's true, sweetheart. I didn't know myself."

"I was the one who wrote the letter," Reba continued. "I didn't want to come forward at first because I thought it would be unfair to disrupt your life. Finally I realized that it was just as unfair not to tell you. I made a big mistake keeping my identity a secret for so long. I was afraid your father would think I'd try to take you away from him."

"You did want me." Becky's words came out filled with certainty.

"Even though I thought I'd done the right thing by you, giving you up for adoption, I still felt terrible. I thought I must be an awful person to have given away my baby."

Becky gave herself up to great sobs. When she leaned forward tentatively, Reba opened her arms in welcome. They came together in a hug, both crying now, telling each other how glad they were to be mother and daughter.

When they at last eased apart, Reba noticed that Jase had left the room. "Are you okay?" she asked Becky. When the girl nodded vigorously in the brave fashion Reba expected, she said, "I have to talk to your father."

"Dad's been real mad at you," Becky said. "He hasn't said anything, but I know. Is everything going to be okay?"

Reba bit down on her bottom lip. No more lies, she told herself. "I don't know, honey. I hope so."

Leaving Becky, knowing that she might never see her again, Reba bestowed a brilliant smile on her daughter. Then, not trusting herself to speak, she quickly departed.

She found Jase in his study. He turned, his gaze assessing her. "There's only one thing I'm interested in hearing from you."

"And what's that?"

"Your promise you won't come within ten miles of my daughter."

Reba squeezed her eyes shut as she took a breath. "I was hoping you wouldn't do that. I know I have no rights where she's concerned, but I was counting on some compassion."

"I'm not worried about your feelings, Reba. All I want is to have Becky's and my life back to normal. If that's even possible."

"I see," she murmured. "I fell in love with you. Can't you see what a terrible position that placed me in?" She stepped closer to him. "I planned to tell you." She looked at him directly, entreating him with wet eyes.

"Oh, Reba, why do you torture me?" His breath came in a great rasping gulp.

"I love you!"

Just when she sensed his armor cracking, he regained control. "No. I only want you to go," he said softly.

*

AS SOON AS SHE got off work on December twenty-fourth, Reba hurried to The Sunshine Home. She went straight to the kitchen and by seven o'clock had several dozen cookies to show for her efforts. Birdie, her ample bosom covered by a practical red apron, bustled over to the counter.

"Oh, you're so talented, Reba," Birdie fussed. "I hope you can spend more time here."

"I'm afraid I might be leaving Seattle. I've been thinking about applying for a job in Portland."

"Oh, my dear, I wouldn't be in such a rush."

"Jase is adamant, Birdie. He doesn't trust me." She wiped her hands on a dish towel. "It's an impossible situation."

"Mr. Kingsford needs some time to adjust," Birdie said, turning her back to Reba as she glazed a ham for dinner. "I called him to see how Becky was doing. He didn't seem like such a hard man."

"Huh! A boulder would be more flexible."

Even though Christmas that year was miserable for Reba, it was a festive time for the youthful residents of The Sunshine Home. Everyone agreed that the tree was beautiful, the dinner delicious and the cookies as good to eat as they were to look at.

Birdie settled in the window chair across from Reba. She glanced back over her shoulder, out the window. "Oh, good! My surprise has arrived." Birdie's little dark eyes sparkled. "Go open the back door, will you?"

Reba opened the door to white falling snow, a red-suited Santa and a bright green elf.

"Merry Christmas, Reba!" cried the elf, throwing out her arms and giving Reba a wild hug. "Oh, I can't wait to tell you—"

"Becky, hush." Jase's deep voice sent thrills up Reba's spine. "You know what we talked about."

Her heart pounding, Reba slowly raised her gaze from Becky to the face of the tall Santa. There was no mistaking those ocean-blue eyes.

"Jase," she blurted out.

Jase looked deeply into Reba's dark brown eyes. Birdie was hurrying toward them, looking quite pleased with herself and calling out, "Hello, Mr. Kingsford—I mean Santa. I'm so thrilled you came today." She patted Becky's

shoulder, smiling down at the young girl. "Becky, why don't you come with me? We're going to sing carols around the piano. I think Santa and Reba have some talking to do."

Becky looked over her shoulder and gave her father a conspiratorial wink.

When they had gone, Jase moved toward Reba. "Your mouth is still hanging open."

"It's entitled to. What's the meaning of all this?"

"Becky won't give you up." He paused. "And neither will I." Suddenly he tore off the white beard and flung it aside, moving toward her. "I said a lot of stupid things. They don't matter now. All that matters is that I love you and you love me. It's unimportant how our relationship began."

His words intoxicated her, and she yearned to lose herself in them.

"I've had a lot of time to think about what you told Becky about your life. I understand how hard it must have been for you to open up after all these years." He stroked her hair. "I'll never doubt you again."

"Oh, Jase," Reba cried, at last allowing herself to believe that her most cherished fantasy had become a reality. "Do you mean that?"

His mouth began to curve at the edges. "I love you."

Strains of "Silent Night" floated through the air.

"You're sure you're not just getting carried away with Christmas sentiment?" Reba asked him, her old doubts still not completely quelled.

"You just have to trust me." He gave her a teasing wink. "I almost forgot. I have a little Christmas present here for you. Perhaps this will convince you my love is true."

He dug into the pocket of his Santa coat and pulled out an elegant silver-wrapped box. She opened it with trembling fingers. The largest, most brilliant pear-shaped diamond she had ever seen rested inside.

For a full minute she remained speechless. "It's . . . it's a diamond ring."

"Does that mean yes?"

She held out her left hand, her fingers spread wide for him to slip on the symbol of his love. Love for Jase filled her heart to the brim, leaving no more room for doubt. She raised her blurry gaze to the blue eyes that so clearly revealed his feelings. "I have nothing for you," she murmured. "I had no way of knowing."

Becky strolled into the kitchen and caught her dad's eye. When he

grinned and nodded, she let out a cheer.

Tenderly Jase brushed the curly, dark wisps from Reba's forehead.

"You've already given me the finest gift I could ever receive. Your love." He bent to kiss Reba deeply. "And that's the honest truth."



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STAR SIGNS—NOVEMBER & DECEMBER



LIBRA September 23–October 22

You have been dwelling on your own situation for long enough, take the advice of those closest to you as they really can help. A lucky break could lift your spirits toward the end of the month and may even turn the tide of success in your favor, in more ways than one!



SCORPIO October 23–November 22

Socially, you're very much in demand with a lively month ahead. Be sure you don't double book an engagement, the offended party could prove a real handful! An opportunity to earn money via a hobby may be presented by an unlikely source around the 18th.



SAGITTARIUS November 23–December 22

Rest assured, your desire for romance will be fulfilled—with a chance meeting possibly leading to much greater things! You may have the opportunity to take a short break during the third week of the month, despite your finances—Go for it!



CAPRICORN December 23–January 22

Your charm must give you the edge in important negotiations that may take place this month—concerning money and relationships—what else? Learn to stay calm and you'll be amazed at the lengths to which others will go to make you happy!



AQUARIUS January 23–February 22

Despite the good things happening for you at the moment, you still feel unable to shake off the blues. Try showing more affection toward those you love—their response could be just the trick!



PISCES February 23–March 22

It's never easy for a Piscean to express his or her own true feelings—but you must do just that before your partner mistakes your silence for indifference. Step out and liven up. Life will be a ball by the third week of the month, so get some of the action!

STAR SIGNS (continued)

**ARIES March 23-April 22**

Home life is a happy one with you and your partner being relaxed, warm and friendly with each other. You may feel the need to rethink your long-term plans and you could have cause to start this sooner than later—but the outcome is good, so panic not!

**TAURUS April 23-May 22**

Communication is needed to gain success this month. Those around you will be enormously receptive, particularly during the first two weeks. Something financial may cause some celebration toward the end of the month.

**GEMINI May 23-June 21**

Pamper yourself this month. It'll give you a much needed confidence boost, and enable you to cope with some of the exciting changes that seem to surround you. You will help yourself if you concentrate on the whole picture rather than the smaller issues.

**CANCER June 22-July 22**

Money, romance and travel are well aspected this month—it's rare to get them all, so grab the chance when it comes! But careful with someone close to you who may be feeling incredibly jealous over something that you are completely oblivious to.

**LEO July 23-August 22**

Falling in love again—watch out. It could be the best thing since sliced bread, but it could also be exactly the opposite! Real opportunities are emerging for your life to radically change, but you must know what you want first.

**VIRGO August 23-September 22**

You impress those around you with your cheerful manner despite some problems. A choice between stability or big rewards could present itself and, after much thought, you will make what proves to be the right decision.

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THROUGH LAUGHTER AND TEARS ◦

Marie Ferrarella

Sam Madison had always used humor to hide her feelings of inadequacy from the world, but when she met talent manager Jake Benedict, her armor failed her. Jake made her a star, and she was grateful to him for that, but he also saw right through to her vulnerability. She couldn't hide anything from him, and that became her biggest problem. More than anything, she had to keep him from finding out that in her heart of hearts she wanted to be more than his client—she wanted to be his woman.

ONLY WITH THE HEART ◦ Sandra Kitt

Travis Hoyt emerged from the night to pluck her from a rainswept doorway. His manner was rough, his face forbidding, but Cathy Donnelly gratefully accepted his offer of sanctuary from the storm. Soaked to the skin, chilled to the very marrow of her bones, Cathy followed Travis across a deserted Key West dock, too tired for second thoughts and much too young to be afraid.

It was to be an unforgettable night for them both....

Look for these stories
and many more in
future issues!

READER'S CORNER

CROSSWORD #21

ACROSS

1. Corn unit
4. Hairdresser's need
8. Refute
13. Plateau
14. Purple dye
15. Ham it up
16. Pretentious
17. Very dry
18. Discharged
19. Bakery output
20. Valuables
22. Wear away
25. Make lace
26. Nuisances
29. Presidential refusals
33. Confines
36. Rabbit
38. Saudi
40. Persian Gulf state
41. Carries
42. "___ La Douce"
43. Scant
44. Unrefined metals
45. Beginning
46. Car style
48. Wading bird
50. Gel
52. Tree homes
55. States again
60. Actor Ely
62. Flick
63. Tidy
64. Story
65. Occurrence
66. Social event
67. Amino, for one

68. Homes for nomads

69. Hit with an open hand

70. Bunk

DOWN

1. Strange
2. Fall flower
3. Light beam
4. Social levels
5. Unusual person
6. Swamp
7. Sheep sound
8. Deny
9. Arab prince
10. Tedious one
11. Western Indians
12. Sen. Kennedy
13. Chart

21. Rescues

23. Began

24. ___ Moines

27. God of thunder

28. Provides enough

30. Spoils

31. Hockey great and family

32. Ditto

33. Wheel part

34. Citrus drinks

35. Actor Richard

37. Take ten

39. Flying mammal

41. Musical pitches

45. Spanish cheer

47. Resources

49. Foot part

51. Leans

53. Hint

54. Firm

55. Wander

56. Tied

57. Slangy negative

58. Actual

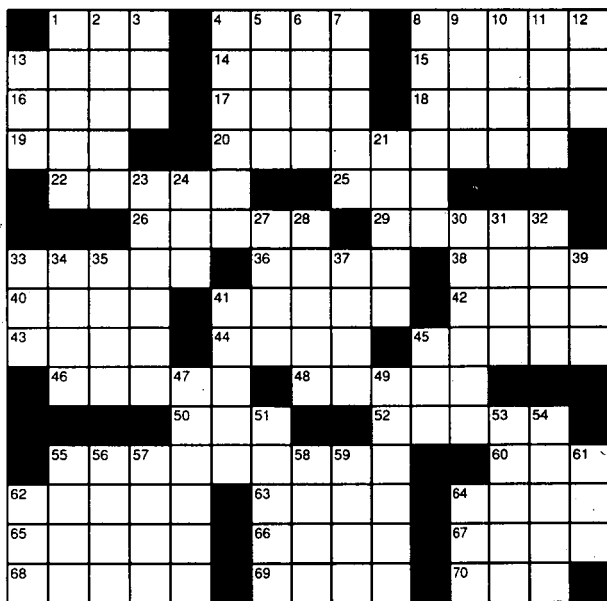
59. So long: hyph.

61. Actor Beatty

62. Encountered

64. Small flap

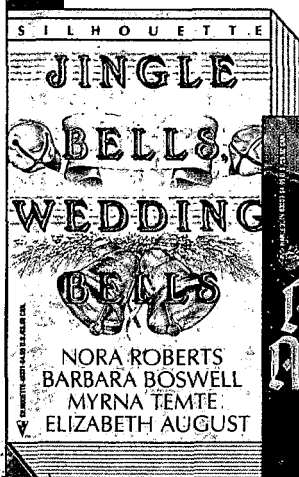
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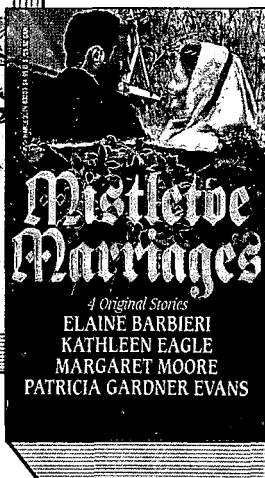
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